

HARLEQUIN®
WORLD'S BEST

Vol. 3 No. 6

\$2.75

Romances

#BXNCBFB*****5-DIGIT 50125
#WBS0002249928/0#18 FEB95

LINDA RODGERS
602 RIVINGTON

UV
IA 50125-3239

SPECIAL THIS MONTH
"SUMMER SONG"
PLUS
3 MORE GREAT
LOVE STORIES!

Summer Song
Bedouin Bride
Corporate Affair
Dazzle

RITA CLAY
BARBARA FAITH
STEPHANIE JAMES
ANN MAJOR

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



RITA CLAY

Rita Clay, cofounder and first president of the Romance Writers of America, didn't start out to be a writer. She studied art and psychology, worked as a model, a secretary, a salesperson and a bookstore manager. But Rita's countless fans are glad she found her true calling—creating enthralling romances. This talented author makes her home in Texas.

BARBARA FAITH

Barbara Faith is a true romantic who believes that love is a rare and precious gift. She has an endless fascination with the attraction a man and a woman from different cultures and backgrounds have for each other. She considers herself a good example of such an attraction, because she has been happily married for twenty years to an ex-matador she met when she lived in Mexico.



STEPHANIE JAMES

Stephanie James's first romance novel appeared over ten years ago, and she is now considered one of the genre's most popular writers. The author, whose commitment to romance fiction continues to grow with her success and reputation, has more than ten million copies of her books in print. She presently lives in Washington State with her husband.

ANN MAJOR

Ann Major is not only a successful author, she also manages a business and runs a busy household with three children. She lists traveling and playing the piano among her many interests—her favorite composer, quite naturally, is the romantic Chopin.



HARLEQUIN®
WORLD'S BEST
Romances

From the desk of Candy Lee,
Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader,

As I sit here at my desk, I find myself thinking of tonight...relaxing on the front porch, watching the sun slowly melt into the earth--creating the perfect atmosphere for romance!

It's amazing, just thinking of tonight--the faraway places, the adventure, the passion--makes it hard waiting a few hours to rendezvous with...two hearts from two different worlds that beat as one...a man willing to give a woman just what she wants...a woman reunited with the one man who can take her heart to its highest peak...a setup for revenge that ignites a flaming passion!

Join me in making this night one to remember--with this month's heartwarming volume of WORLD'S BEST ROMANCES!

Best wishes,

Candy Lee

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Harlequin World's Best Romances Vol. 3 No. 6
© 1994 by Harlequin Enterprises B.V.

All rights reserved.

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher, Harlequin Periodicals Inc., 112 Tenth St., Des Moines, IA 50309.

Published by arrangement with Harlequin Enterprises B.V.

All characters in this volume have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

The publisher acknowledges the copyright holders of the originally published full-length works as follows:

Summer Song © MCMLXXXIII by Rita Clay

Bedouin Bride © MCMLXXXIV by Barbara Faith

Corporate Affair © MCMLXXXVII by Stephanie James

Dazzle © MCMLXXXV by Ann Major

® and TM are trademarks of Harlequin Enterprises Limited used under license. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Trade Marks Office and in other countries.

Printed in the U.S.A.

CANDY LEE
MANAGING EDITOR

SHELLEY CINNAMON
ART DIRECTOR

MARY ABTHORPE
CIRCULATION DIRECTOR

BONNIE HALEY
SUBSCRIPTION MANAGER

Harlequin World's Best Romances (ISSN 1183-5044) Vol. 3 No. 6 May/June 1994. Published six times per year every other month by Harlequin Periodicals Inc., 112 Tenth Street, Des Moines, IA 50309. Second Class postage paid at Des Moines, IA, and additional mailing offices.

Subscription rates U.S. only: 6 issues—\$11.96. Single-issue rate—\$2.75. Subscriptions not available outside the U.S.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Harlequin Periodicals Inc., P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233. For subscription orders, changes of address, correspondence concerning subscription, write Harlequin World's Best Romances, c/o Harlequin Periodicals Inc., P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233. Please enclose latest address label for quickest service when writing about subscription.

HARLEQUIN®
WORLD'S BEST

Romances

C O N T E N T S

SUMMER SONG

Rita Clay

Page 5



BEDOUIN BRIDE

Barbara Faith

Page 40



CORPORATE AFFAIR

Stephanie James

Page 91



DAZZLE

Ann Major


Page 117



**RITA
CLAY**
**Summer
Song**



**Caro wanted a baby, but not a husband. J.T. Cole
had different ideas. The hardest thing for
Caro to accept was that once she had met J.T.,
nothing but love would do for her, either!**



“I won’t allow my brother to hire himself out as a stud!” A large fist banged down on the desk top. “I don’t care how many contracts he signs!”

The young attorney behind the desk watched his friend’s anger with sympathetic eyes. “Calm down, J.T., and let me explain the rest of it. Maybe you’ll change your mind. I promised Brandon I’d try.”

The man called J.T. sat down. His hands were clenched, his mouth tight with anger. He was a rugged, masculine man, perhaps too much so to be handsome, though the right features were there: deep brown eyes that could turn soft when he looked at women; thick, dark hair layered to a casual symmetry. His nose had been broken once or twice, although somehow that added to his sex appeal. His broad shoulders, trim hips, and muscular thighs confirmed his peak physical condition. He was two or three inches under six feet, but he was dynamite, and women seemed to sense it.

“There’s nothing you can tell me, Mike, that will change my decision. Why is this girl going this route, anyway? Can’t she just find some guy willing to bed her and leave the young kids alone?”

“First of all, Caro Halter is not some deviant,” Mike answered patiently. “And your brother is now twenty-one years old. Caro is looking for a man with the right genes who can give her a child. Period. She doesn’t want anyone to come back ten years

from now and say, ‘Remember me?’ Thus the money and the contract.”

“And my brother is the only guy who fills these qualifications, I suppose.” J.T. snorted. “This job is probably the only thing he’s had experience doing, but that doesn’t mean he can’t learn something else! He told me about it because he’s gotten himself in over his head.” His eyes narrowed. “How do you know this girl won’t try to blackmail him years from now? What kind of girl would ‘hire’ someone for a job like this?”

“She’s a respected member of the community and a very successful businesswoman. She’s attractive, talented, and very reserved. I think she’s always wanted children but never found anyone she wanted to marry. Adoption is out of the question for a single parent. As for her trying to contact Brandon in the future, she’s more worried about him finding her.”

J.T. was silent for a moment. Then he said, “What about me? If Brandon qualifies, then I certainly must. What if I took his place in this fiasco?”

Mike shrugged, not realizing that his friend’s question was a ploy to get more information about the girl. “If you wish to meet with her, I can arrange it. However, she’s meeting with Brandon this afternoon at the Utah Hotel.” He stared down at the folder in front of him. “I don’t want you to think there’s something wrong with this woman, J.T. There isn’t. Only her means to an end are being discussed

here, not her morals or ethics, which are far above standard."

J.T. made a choking noise. "Apparently this girl has pretty wrapping paper and her ribbons are in the right places. But that doesn't mean the contents of the package are top quality."

"It does in this case." Mike was stubborn.

J.T. stood. "We'll see." His determination to expose the woman was almost as strong as his desire to stop his brother. And now there was the added bonus of proving to Mike just how faulty his character judgment was... again.

J.T. Cole walked out of the plush law offices, practically marched to the elevators, and jabbed the Down button.

Damn that Brandon!

Five sons and one daughter were the firm foundation of the Cole family, and they were all overachievers... except Brandon. In earlier days he had been laughingly called "Brandon the Lazy," for if he thought he could make money without working, he would try twice as hard as for any legitimate job.

J.T. stepped aboard the elevator when the doors finally opened. The funny side of the situation was beginning to make itself known. His anger had even simmered down. It would work out. He'd play her along, like he had often done with catfish on the hook. Mike had inadvertently disclosed her hotel, which should make her easy to find, and J.T. could get a description of her from Brandon.

Suddenly J.T. felt like whistling. He had almost forgotten that he had a date with Candice that night. Perhaps he'd

take her to the Utah Hotel for dinner....

CAROL'S FIRST thought on entering Salt Lake City's most famous hotel was that he looked so young! She quickly scanned the plush lobby for some other young man in faded jeans and green knit shirt who could fit the description her attorney had given her, but there was no one else.

She took a deep breath and approached him. "Brandon Cole?" she questioned. In her tottery high heels she came just to the level of his broad shoulders. She held out her hand. "I'm Carolyn." His face was blank, with only a flicker of interest in his pale brown eyes. "I'm the person you came here to meet," she reminded him. He flushed a dull red, standing straighter.

His hand was cold and clammy, his clasp weak. Not good, but not an inherited trait. She turned to look for a private conversational area, and found one immediately.

"Shall we sit over here?" She guided him to the spot she had selected.

He gestured nervously, the sweep of his hand encompassing the entire lobby. It was the oldest hotel in Salt Lake City and certainly one of the finest.

"Beautiful hotel." His voice was an octave higher than on the telephone.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" Perhaps he needed to get his bearings. "Did you bring the papers from Dr. Sanders?"

He reached into his pocket for a sheet of paper, and offered it to her, his eyes lighting on her face for the first time. His glance seemed to take in her appearance all at once. Her dark golden-blond hair hung in waves to her shoulders, framing her oval face. Her

silvery brown eyes were delicately tinted with the same color eye shadow. Her figure, although she was small in stature, was perfectly formed.

"Why are you doing this?" He sounded perplexed. "You're good-looking, for an older woman. You have charm, polish, a sexy body. Any guy'd be crazy not to want to fall into bed with you. Why me?"

She mentally winced at his crudeness, but ignored her own trepidation. After all her hours of soul-searching, this was the only answer she had come up with. She still had doubts herself, but it was the end result that mattered most. She would finally have a family to call her own.

"First of all, this is to be done by artificial insemination, so no one has to 'fall into bed' with anyone. I'm thirty-five years old and I've decided I want a child without the encumbrance of a husband. I also want a bright child, free of inherited illness. With the right male, I've eliminated whatever problems I can for the child." Her smile was bright and brittle.

"And I'm it?" A smirk suddenly appeared on his face, but that wasn't inherited, either. It came from being young and virile and good-looking in a society that paid too much attention to such things.

"We don't know that yet, do we?" She eyed him with an even gaze and his smirk washed away, to be replaced with a dull flush. She scanned the doctor's report. Yes, he was in perfect health; yes, he was male and over twenty-one...barely. Yes, he had had the usual childhood diseases but none of the debilitating ones that could be inherited. Neither, apparently, had his parents, four brothers, and one sister.

"Do you need the fee I'll be paying you?"

"Yes. I want to open a ski shop."

"Where?" She leaned forward.

"In Snowhawk."

"If I upped the ante, would you consider moving to another state?"

His light brown eyes lit up with interest. "Why?"

"Because I live in Utah and I would prefer that you didn't."

"Does that mean I have the 'job'?"

His grin turned into another smirk.

"It means that I'm still considering the remote possibility." Her tone quelled him. "I'm not ready to hand over thousands of dollars to someone just because he has a nice, undiseased body. If that were the case, I wouldn't be interviewing you."

He winced. "Ouch, lady."

"Now we both need to think about it." She stood, all five feet three of her. "What does your family think about this? Have you discussed it?"

"Lord, no!" He stood, his lean frame towering over her. "Well, I did tell my sister, but she thinks I'm crazy, anyway." His easy stance told her that he had suddenly relaxed as he began to talk about his family. This was a good sign.

"I'll have my attorney call you by the end of the week." She quelled the gleam in his eyes with her next words. "In the meantime I'll decide if I think we're compatible."

"I still have to work for a living," he countered.

"So do I," she answered, holding out her hand. "We'll be in touch. Thank you for your time."

The cab drove around the city, following her instructions. Caro gave Brandon Cole time to leave the hotel,

before she returned and entered again through a back entrance. Everything that could be done to retain her mysterious identity had been done. There would be no way for him to trace her, either then or later.

She opened the door to her suite and slipped off her shoes, then stripped off her dress and slip. Her warm shower was soothing rather than invigorating. The triple-sheeted bed made Caro smile. Where else would one find a bottom sheet, top sheet, and a sheeted blanket except in the finest hotels? She didn't travel from home often, but when she did it was marvelous to know that she could finally afford to go first class.

She thought over her conversation with Brandon Cole, and his knowing, cocky manner. She had met many men of his type during her years of traveling with a band. He and the others like him had the one thing she had always craved: family. And he didn't even know how lucky he was!

All her life Caro had dreamed of having a family to call her own. Even knowing that families had their share of problems and conflicts hadn't detracted from her teenage daydreams. Once she had thought that her dreams of a home and husband were about to come true, only to find that the call of his own family was stronger than his attraction to her.

Life had taught her a hard lesson and now Caro consistently withdrew from anything that remotely resembled an entanglement. Everything and everyone, with the exception of Sam, the general manager of her bar and dance hall and her surrogate father. But his love, although sorely needed

and appreciated, wasn't enough. Slowly her eyes closed and she slept.

The noise seemed to fit into her dream at first; then it woke her. It was the phone.

"Caro, I'm just checking in with you before the evening crowd starts. Everything going all right?"

She grinned. "Yes, Sam, everything's fine. I'm just going to have dinner before relaxing with a good book."

"No company to entertain you?"

"I'm by myself, Sam," she promised.

"Well, I was just checkin'. I didn't want any surprises when I picked you up tomorrow."

"No surprises," she said firmly. "I'll see you tomorrow at two. Don't forget."

THE HOTEL restaurant was one of the finest in Utah. Caro was seated by a waiter who had obviously been with them for years. He knew many of the customers by name, and there was no random selection of seating; it had to do with wealth, class, or social station.

Obviously her midnight-black designer dress and sleekly pulled-back hairdo put Caro in the "upper-class" section. Her small table was cozily situated in the corner. It was perfect. She ordered a half bottle of dry white wine to accompany broiled sole with thinly sliced walnuts. The waiter deftly poured the wine for her to taste, then filled her glass with the golden liquid.

She sat back, perusing the room. Her second favorite thing to do was people watching. Her first was watching her club, the Loose Noose, grow in prestige and profitability. It had been

going for seven years, over five of them under her ownership. It wasn't often that she left Park City and the club, so this trip was truly a treat.

Her eyes were drawn to the table across from her. A young, dark-haired woman laughed throatily at her escort, one be ringed hand stroking the top of his wrist, her fingertips lazily outlining the face of his very expensive watch. The man listened to her with tolerant amusement etched on his roughly hewn face. His thick, dark brows met across his forehead in a frown at something she said, his full, carved lips thinning as he shook his head.

When he looked up, it was to lock eyes with Caro, scanning her face and form before nodding in silent invitation. An intangible chill ran up her spine at the intimacy of his look and her lips pursed in disapproval. He had his hands full with one woman and yet he thought he could handle another. Some men's egos knew no bounds!

She paid her bill, gathered her purse and shawl, and left the darkened restaurant. It was time to get a good night's sleep.

Early the next morning everything was packed, all her calls made, and Caro was ready to leave. The telephone rang.

"Miss Carolyn?" The deep voice had a slight Southern drawl.

"Yes."

"I'm calling about Brandon Cole. I'd like to meet with you and discuss your arrangement with him."

"I don't believe any of this is your business."

"Anything to do with Brandon is my business."

"And who are you?"

"That doesn't matter. I want to terminate this arrangement."

"Since I haven't chosen a candidate yet, I suggest you wait to see if he is even chosen."

"My God, you mean there are others?"

"It's really none of your business,"

Caro said and hung up the phone.

She didn't like that. Only the two people involved should discuss something like this. Damn! The telephone began to ring again but this time Caro ignored it.

She placed her two suitcases by the door, glancing around to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything. In the bathroom, something in the corner glittered a dull gold. It was one of her large hoop earrings, wedged between the countertop and the commode. Caro could barely reach it.

"What I need is a five-foot-long arm as thin as a mop handle," she muttered before remembering that she had heard the cleaning women earlier.

Within minutes, while the maid stood behind her, Caro used the mop handle to try and edge the earring within touching distance.

"Anything I can do to help?" The slow Southern drawl echoed off the tile walls.

Caro and the maid jumped, and Caro dropped the mop handle with a clatter.

"Look what you made me do!" Her heart was beating a fast tattoo, as she glared at the man standing in the doorway. It took her a minute to register that he was the one in the restaurant the night before. He was wearing a pale gray suit with a white silk shirt and a ruby and azure tie. Every inch the gentleman. But his face was rug-

ged and rough, his build muscular. His features were hard, carved, and slightly uneven in a sensuously masculine way.

"I'll reach it," he promised, shrugging out of his jacket. And soon he held it up, with a grin that would have melted the heart of a more susceptible woman.

The maid slipped out of the room and shut the door.

"Thank you," said Caro, chin slightly tilted.

"I'm sure you're welcome."

She motioned him out of the confines of the bathroom and toward the less intimate bedroom. He grinned broadly as if reading her mind, then followed her to sit on the bed.

"Is there something you want?" she asked.

"I came to speak to you," he said. "I want to offer you a deal."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. What sort of deal?"

"If you drop this 'proposition' with Brandon Cole I won't file charges for prostitution." The humor had fled. His voice was quiet, with just a hint of a Southern drawl, but his eyes were hard.

Caro clenched her hands. "Get out," she said quietly.

He didn't move. "If it's sex you want, then I know a few hundred men who would oblige. If it's a baby you want, there are orphanages." His voice lowered to a rasp. "And if it's trouble you want, then continue on this course."

"If you have any more to say, please say it to my attorney, Mr. Mike Avery, here in Salt Lake City."

For just a second there was a glint of admiration in his dark brown eyes.

"And who shall I say his client is? Miss Carolyn? I doubt it."

"You could use that name and glean the proper information." She ignored the urge to ask him who he was. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction!

"Goodbye." She slipped her purse strap up to her shoulder and reached for her bags, intending to leave. But a viselike arm clamped around her waist and pulled her back against his hard-muscled body. "Is this a game to you? It won't bother me in the least to scream for the cleaning woman. She's still around, you know." Her voice was calm, her eyes staring straight ahead.

His warm breath stirred the small strands of hair around her ear. The deep rumble that passed for his laugh was more felt than heard. Was this man dangerous? Was he insane?

"I'm afraid you don't understand," she placated him. "I want you to let me go. I'll discuss Mr. Cole with you in the lobby. But not like this." She tried to sound cool and relaxed.

"Reach your foot out and push both suitcases against the door," he demanded.

She did as she was told.

He tugged lightly, pulling her even closer. Her heart stopped beating as his hand deliberately cupped one firm breast encased in lacy nylon.

"For a girl who's hiring a stud, you're very nervous." He made his low opinion of her quite clear. "All I want to do is talk to you."

"Hiring implies that I have a choice in the man. You're giving me none." She tried to raise her arms, but his iron hold kept them glued to her sides. She was frightened, but forced herself to relax and he momentarily let down his guard in response. She quickly jerked

one arm free and jabbed her elbow hard into his stomach. He gasped and released his grip.

She grabbed her purse and bags, then ran out of the door. It wasn't until she got into the elevator that she began to giggle. The giggle turned into a laugh and the laugh to salty tears.

*

"ANYTHIN' WRONG, little gal?" Sam's narrowed, knowing eyes saw more than most people realized.

"No," Caro answered absently, staring out the pickup's window at the foothills of the mountains she loved. "It was a productive trip." His face flashed through her mind's eye again. He was shorter than Brandon Cole, two or three inches shy of six feet, but his muscular frame told her that he was in far better shape than most men would ever be. A chill shot down her spine as she recalled the hold he had used on her. He hadn't wanted to hurt her. As a matter of fact, his grasp had been almost reluctant until he had reached for her breast. Her anger rose. That was typical of the arrogant male!

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you were on the warpath about somethin'," Sam observed.

She reached over and patted his gnarled hand, her eyes still focused on the mountains ahead. "Not really, Sam. I'm tired. I guess I just don't travel well. I missed my own pillow."

The old cowboy muttered something inaudible under his breath before silencing himself for the rest of the short trip from Salt Lake City to Park City.

Thirty minutes later Caro got out of the pickup and climbed the freshly painted wooden steps of her quaint

Victorian home. The house was painted a delft blue with crisp white shutters and cupolas. Lace curtains and potted plants created an old-fashioned feeling.

"Do you want a cold beer, Sam?" she called over her shoulder. "I'm having some tea."

"I have to get back to the bar. I'm opening at four-thirty today, remember?" Saturdays were so busy that they had begun to open the club early. Sam followed her into the kitchen, his battered Stetson in his hand.

"Then you don't need me for anything tonight?"

"Not unless you want to sing with the band." His eyes twinkled. "I could always listen to your caterwaulin'."

She grinned back, knowing that he loved to tease her almost as much as he loved to hear her sing.

His teasing look fled. "Did you talk to that attorney about your crazy plan?"

"I'm going through with it, Sam." She turned off the kettle, not quite willing to put her ideas into words.

"I just don't see you doing this, Caro," he began, only to have her interrupt him.

"I want a healthy baby with all the chances life can give him or her. For that to happen, heredity must be taken into account." They had been over this ground before.

"I'll bet if you tried, someone would let you adopt a baby, even if you are single."

"Why should I adopt when I'm perfectly capable of having a child of my own? Besides, I would always worry that someday someone could take the baby away from me."

"But if you go through with this, some guy could come back and claim the baby, anyway," he argued.

"Except that I would have a paper that the father had signed, giving up all rights. It would be nearly impossible for him to fight that kind of custody." She could see by the look in Sam's old gray eyes that he accepted her determination, even if he didn't understand it. He shook his head and walked toward the back door.

"I'll call you tomorrow and let you know the day's receipts." He spoke in a low monotone.

"Fine. See you Monday," she called. Damn! Why couldn't he see just how important this baby was to her? With all the wealth she had accumulated, just think of all the luxuries she could give a child. *Her* child!

Born in a charity hospital in the Midwest and abandoned at the age of three to be raised in a series of foster homes, Caro had learned at an early age that if you weren't bound by blood, nothing would win you first place in someone's heart.

As she entered her early teens she had become more introspective, a loner in a complex system of loners. But a resiliency had been born that would help her achieve success. She wanted to be able to say, "See, I did it! I'm successful and everyone said I wasn't winner material!" But most of all, she wanted roots.

Caro was singing in local bands by the time she was sixteen and traveling all over the country a year later. She had taken odd jobs during the day as a waitress, dishwasher, or janitor—anything that paid enough to live on. At night she would sing; the noise and

collective energy kept her awake and on her feet until the gig was over.

Eight years later her current band was playing Salt Lake City when Caro discovered that she finally had enough for a small down payment on a business. And in a country-and-western dance hall there, she met Sam.

Caro had wandered out back for a breath of fresh air between sets when the stage door opened and three men walked out, all of them drunk.

One stopped to ogle and then spoke. "Honey, you're one fine piece of—"

His words were cut off by a moving shadow in the darkness. "That's enough, Hank. Shut your mouth before you're in real trouble."

Within moments the men were gone and the shadow turned into substance... the bouncer from the bar, who had been there all along.

She lowered her defenses to thank him, then left them down. There was a mental kinship between them from the start, and from then on, Sam watched over her like an older brother.

On the last day the band was to play at that bar, Sam came in and quietly stood at the back of the room during rehearsal. When Caro stepped down from the stage, Sam motioned to her.

"I found something I thought might interest you," he whispered, handing her a local newspaper ad.

She scanned it quickly. "Where's Park City?"

"In the heart of the Utah skiing country, about thirty minutes from here. I'll take you."

Within two weeks Caro had signed the papers that made her the lessee of a building there. If, within a year, she decided to buy said building, her payments would be put toward that goal.

Sam would manage her newly acquired dance hall, the Loose Noose.

Six years later Caro offered Sam a partnership, which he declined. He worked for a salary and a percentage of the profits, and that was all he said he wanted. He was still a loner.

The previous year Caro had built her dream house. It looked as if it had perched in the foothills since the mining heyday that was Park City's claim to fame.

But the house still hadn't been the cure for that small, empty ache somewhere deep inside her. That ache would only be filled by having people to love, a family. She wanted a child.

Thus had begun the soul-searching and the search for a father.

She didn't hear the car door slam, so when the doorbell rang she jumped, startled.

She opened the door, then froze when she saw her visitor. "You!"

His smile was cold, his eyes narrowed. He seemed satisfied that she was surprised.

"I'd love to come in, thank you." He stepped over the threshold, knowing that she wouldn't block his way. Electricity filled the air as the emotional sparks flew between them.

"How did you find me?" Somehow she already knew.

"I followed you. I want to discuss Brandon Cole."

"I won't discuss him unless he's here." But she knew they would talk.

"Should we discuss this over a cup of coffee, a glass of wine, or just sit in your living room?"

She gave a heavy sigh. "Whatever."

"The living room," he decided, then walked in slowly and sat down. "Very

nice." He acted as if his being there was nothing unusual.

"Thank you." She sat on the couch opposite.

"I talked to your lawyer and to Brandon, and we all agree that he won't do for your purpose."

"Did my attorney tell you just how long I've been looking for someone who can qualify?" Her voice was calm, but she was seething inside. It didn't matter that she hadn't been too thrilled with Brandon Cole either. Now she would defend her position to the death.

He nodded. "Yes."

"Mr. Cole seems to need the money."

"He always needs money that he doesn't have to work for." His tone was cold. "And that's why he won't earn it this way. He'd end up with no self-respect and the girl who really loves him would be gone forever. He'd lose everything."

"Except eight thousand dollars," Caro said.

"To quote an old saying, 'Money isn't everything.'" His eyes glinted. "Besides, he wants to know a few things about you, too." His eyes continued to rove insolently up and down her figure.

"All he had to do was ask. But his first and last questions were about money."

He shrugged. "Well, I have a few that aren't." She nodded. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-five."

"Ever been married?"

"Never."

"Boyfriends?"

"On occasion, but not at present."

"Why not choose a boyfriend for this?"

"I thought of that until a man I was dating told me that his ex-wife had had a child born with crippling arthritis. Then it dawned on me that you never know what's in someone's genetic background. Shortly after that, I read of a case where a man found out that his old girlfriend had given birth to a baby boy a few years earlier. He sued for custody and won. That's when I contacted a lawyer to try and eliminate any foreseeable problems. I'm trying to protect my child."

"But most of all you're protecting yourself." His sparkling dark eyes strained to see into her mind. For one crazy moment she had the feeling that he knew about the fight she was having with herself against his magnetism. "You want a child so badly that you'd consider hiring someone for the job?" he asked.

"Correction. I *will* hire someone for the job," she said with more bravado than she felt. She was more attracted to this man than she had been to any man in years.

His eyes dropped to her hands, which gave away her nervousness. He glanced back up. "Then hire me," he said calmly.

Her face went blank. "No."

He leaned forward. "Why not?"

"I don't know you or anything about you."

"I can give you any information you need." He leaned back. "I happen to think I'm more suited to the job. My medical information is being processed into letter form now."

Did he know something about Brandon Cole that she didn't? Had Brandon lied? "Why you?"

"Because I fit the requirements, and you, obviously, are not going to drop this scheme. Better me than someone else."

"Is Brandon Cole someone special to you?"

"I know his parents very well, and they would be terribly hurt by his actions." His eyes narrowed. "I'm perfect for the job and I can prove it."

"You don't even know if you can have children." Her voice cracked. Why was she continuing this silly conversation? She knew why. Because he was too fascinating to be ignored.

"I have all the proper equipment," he dryly stated. "A test can prove the rest. As for a character reference, I've known Mike Avery since we were ten. I'm sure he'll swear to my good conduct and sense of fair play in business."

"But..." Her thoughts were whirling.

"And make no mistake, Brandon has withdrawn," he emphasized. "So, unless you wish to continue your search, you'll have to settle for me."

"But... we aren't compatible."

"We don't have to be. After all, I'm giving up my child; you're just investing money. What was the original plan?"

"When the right time came, my physician would handle the rest." Her face was white with strain.

"I see." He stared off somewhere above her head, then suddenly looked back at her intently. "I'm going to leave you for an hour or so. Then I'll return, and whatever your answer is, I'll accept it." He stood.

She stood also. "I'll do as I damn well please, Mr....?"

"J.T. It stands for Joseph Thomas," he grinned.

"Mr. Thomas," she said, ignoring his first name.

He walked to the door, with lithe grace. "I'll see you in an hour or so."

Caro watched him get into his car, a red Porsche. The engine roared into action and then the sound dwindled away as he drove off. She sat down but continued to stare out the window.

She had had doubts concerning her plan before, but she'd always been able to talk herself back into the rightness of it. Now she was more confused than ever. Not because she had changed her mind about the baby, but because she knew the baby's prospective father! She blinked. Could she be seriously considering his crazy, half-baked proposal? Yes, a small voice laughed at her. He's handsome and challenging and intelligent and... willing.

Of course she would accept his offer. It could prove to be an asset that he knew her and where she lived: it showed that she could care for a child. As long as he was willing to submit to the tests and sign the papers, she would be a fool to turn him down.

After further discussing the issue with herself for almost an hour, the problem was solved. Mr. Joseph Thomas would be the father of her child.

She notified her physician concerning Mr. Thomas's credentials, only to find that his doctor had already forwarded the information and everything had been approved.

She contacted Mike Avery, whose blessing of J.T. was nearly wholehearted, though his voice had held a hint of caution and a thread of warning. He had also asked to be released

from interviewing any more applicants. He didn't believe there was another man in Utah who would fit the bill and abide by the rules.

When Mr. Thomas—she couldn't think of him as J.T.—returned exactly on time, she smiled. Another plus for the candidate. He handed her a bunch of lavender as a peace offering, and his smile said that he knew just how much thinking she had had to do.

They sat and quietly discussed the terms Mike had drawn up, with Joseph Thomas agreeing to most things.

"Not artificial insemination. That's final. I agree with everything except that. I happen to believe that a good beginning is one of the most important provisions for our offspring. Also, I'll stay with you until your conception is a fact."

"You're crazy," she muttered under her breath, her eyes wide as she watched him relax. Her forehead was dotted with perspiration, while he looked as cool as an evening breeze.

He stood. "Are you embarrassed to make love with someone? It's the most normal way to begin a baby."

"I don't want to discuss this," she snapped.

"You either buy those rules or you can forget about the baby. You've already decided that I'm your best candidate or you wouldn't have agreed at all. I'm only taking it one step further," he reasoned.

Was he right? Was she overlooking the fact that children should be conceived in, if not love, perhaps liking? Once more she was becoming confused. She would have to go by instinct, something she never did. Sam always said she was too controlled. Perhaps he was right.

Her mouth made up her mind for her. "I choose the time and place?" She was amazed at herself. But in the back of her mind was the reassuring idea that she could back out of his crazy version of her plan at any time.

"You choose the time and place." He grinned disarmingly, his charm stunning her with its impact.

"It's a deal." She held out her hand to be clasped by his.

"Good. Now, where do you want me to sleep?" At her open-mouthed stare, a twinkle invaded his eyes. "In the guest room, I'd wager. Which is fine. We need to get to know each other a little better."

Within an hour he was established in the guest bedroom. Two hours later they were eating dinner in the kitchen. Three hours later they had cleaned up and were playing gin rummy.

And four hours later they were tucked into separate beds, Caro staring at the ceiling. What did they think they were doing? she mused. This was a matter of a child's life and she was worried about whether or not he found her attractive! She tried to concentrate on a mental picture of the last page of the club's ledger.

Anything was better than admitting to herself what happened to her nervous system every time she imagined being captured in his arms.

*

CARO SPREAD her cards on the table. "Gin," she crowed, her eyes lighting up as she watched J.T.'s obvious irritation.

"You're not a professional gambler, are you?" he asked, eyes softening at her unabashed enjoyment.

"Nope," she answered. "But I *am* good!"

J.T. gathered up the cards and began shuffling. "I've spent two days with you now and you still haven't explained to me why you hate men." His voice was easy, his tone conversational.

"Nothing personal," she retorted lightly. "Your sex just doesn't have a lot to recommend it."

"Yet you have a fifty-fifty chance of giving birth to a son."

"It's not the same."

"No matter how cute it is, a wolf cub grows into a wolf."

"Don't patronize me, Joseph. I know what I'm doing. What I don't know is why *you're* here," she snapped. "It can't be for the money."

"J.T.," he corrected. "And don't get off the subject, Caro. Do you think that because you raise a male child he'll be so different from the rest? And if he is, will he ever find happiness? After all, he won't fit in with his male contemporaries if you have your way."

Caro's eyes flashed silver in anger. "If you're trying to confuse me, try harder. I don't need your heckling any more than I need you."

"Don't be so defensive; you give yourself away." He grinned. "You need me, all right."

"No, your kind are all over, ready at the first opportunity to take whatever they can get."

His eyes bored into her, forcing her to let her real feelings reach the surface. "I'm one of a kind and you know it, or I wouldn't still be here."

"I hate you." It came unbidden.

"Good." His voice was laced with satisfaction. "That's the first honest emotion you've shown. Now, perhaps

we can get on with this relationship." His dark eyes twinkled. "Lady, we're gonna make one hell of a baby!" He winked audaciously.

She fumed, but he was right. They *would* make one perfect child.

"ARE YOU COMING by the club tonight? I want to go over a few figures with you," Sam grumbled into the telephone.

"I'll be there around ten. See you then." She hung up, her thoughts focused somewhere inside.

"Are you through, or should I make my calls in the morning?" Joseph's voice rumbled from behind her.

"Be my guest." Mockery laced her voice.

He didn't move. "Are we going out tonight?"

"Not we, *me*."

"And what makes you think I'll stay here?"

"If you want to continue this 'relationship,' you'll do as you're told."

His eyes twinkled. "Just because you're older than I am doesn't mean you can boss me around."

Her face whitened. With everything topsy-turvy these past few days, including her feelings for this man, she had never asked him his age! "How much older?"

"Older than my youngest brother," he quipped, then took mercy on her. "Behave yourself and I might tell you...later." He turned and walked toward the kitchen.

Forcing herself to assume a semblance of calm, Caro followed him to the back of the house and watched as he put the kettle on to boil.

She had been in charge of her life ever since leaving her last foster home.

But since three days ago when Joseph had shown up on her doorstep, she had been acting like a star-struck teenager. It was time to get back in control.

"I'm sorry I was rude, Joseph. We just don't seem to be compatible. I think it might be better if we call this arrangement off." Did her voice sound composed? She hoped so.

"I accept your apology. But the rest is garbage."

"So the big man said to put the little woman in her place." Her voice dripped with fury.

Joseph's eyes lingered on the impatient thrust of her breasts, the smallness of her waist, the slight rounding of her hips. He made visual love to her, stroking her with his soft velvet looks.

"Are you so small-minded that you can only see a woman playing one role in one place?" he asked. "Can't she be both under me and above me?"

"Not this woman. This woman wants you to get out of her house. She can't cope with your kind of man and prefers to continue searching for her child's prospective father elsewhere."

Her words dropped like lead cannonballs. And when they stopped, the silence was so loud that she could hear herself breathe.

Joseph finally spoke. "Your doctor told mine that your fertile time is in a week or so."

Caro's heart stopped beating as he continued.

"You can't find anyone to take my place and you can't really find anything wrong with me, so you lost by default. I'm staying."

"Why?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Because I have no bad habits, I've got the right genes, and I'm available."

Oh, and by the way, I'm thirty-two." He walked over and stood directly in front of her. "The reason you're afraid isn't because I might harm you, but because you might allow your emotions more freedom than they've ever had." His eyes pinned her to the spot. "And, lady, that scares the hell out of you."

His arms slid around her waist, and she watched with fascination as his lips came down to possess hers.

His touch was everything she had feared. His fingers firmly traced the trail of her backbone as it indented at her waist, while his other hand held her close to feel his beginning need of her. His tongue traveled slowly through the crevices of her mouth, as his firm lips moved slowly across hers, receiving a response she couldn't withhold. He pressured her with a hand here, fingers there, his breath warm upon her cheek. He forced her to react to him until she was dizzy with a slow, seeping lethargy that wound its way through her body to wipe out all other feelings. When his mouth left hers to seek the soft contours of her neck she arched compliantly to allow him access, unable to break the exquisite contact of skin against skin.

His touch was all that it could be and more. His skin was warm and tightly textured beneath her wandering hands. Once more his mouth foraged hers, and she tilted her head to give him easier admittance. At this moment his world was her world and she celebrated it.

The teakettle suddenly sang out with a jarring sound and sanity returned. Caro slipped out of J.T.'s arms and took two steps back, her breath still caught in her throat.

He broke the awkward silence with velvet words. "We're going to be very good together."

FOR THREE NIGHTS in a row Caro went to the club, checking supplies and figures, then singing with the band. J.T. accompanied her every night, always making his presence known, but staying out of her way.

On the third night she sang a song about love gone wrong and the last note trembled in the air before a burst of applause echoed to the rafters. He watched her sing, his eyes never leaving her face. J.T. had originally bent simply on conquering her, only to find himself wanting her cute little body as close to his as he could get it. Now. It had been that way ever since he had first seen her in the restaurant.

A hand reached up to help Caro off the stage. The young man's arm went around her waist as he guided her to his companions' table in the center of the room—a trophy to show off to his friends. J.T. remained where he was, with a clear view of both her and the table.

Caro glanced over at him. A small, cruel smile played about his lips, telling her that he already knew her game and was amused by it. That only fueled her anger. She gave a friendlier smile than she had intended to the young man who sat down next to her and ordered a round of drinks.

Caro stayed for a few minutes' conversation, but the taste of vengeance was sour. No matter what she did or how much she flirted, J.T. merely grinned as he watched her make a fool of herself.

As she rose to leave, however, so did the young man.

"Wait a minute, pretty lady. Where are you going?" he slurred.

"It's been fun, but I'm afraid it's over for the evening. Thank you for the drink." She turned to the others at the table. "It was nice to meet you. Enjoy yourselves." Caro made her way to the entrance, not realizing that the young man was following her.

"Honey, I'm going home with you," he muttered. "Why, I came here just to meet you. You can't turn me away."

"I just did." She gave a small shrug and continued toward the door where Sam waited, as usual, keeping a close eye on her. But the young man persisted.

"Just a minute," he said, turning nasty. "I bought you drinks. The least you could do is let me see you home."

That did it! She turned to face him. "Just a minute. You bought me one drink. But even if you'd bought me a dozen, I wouldn't have to let you see me home. Do you understand?"

It wasn't until he heard J.T. beside him that the young man realized there had been a witness.

"Consider yourself told, mister." J.T. spoke quietly, but his slightly tensed body was a warning in itself.

The young cowboy muttered an epithet, then turned to rejoin his friends.

"And you—" J.T. narrowed his angry gaze at Caro "—are coming with me. Now." She began to protest, but he held up his hand. "No sass. Just move."

The short drive home was quiet. Caro tried to keep her anger alive to fend off the other effects he had on her.

After entering Caro's house, J.T. made his way directly to the kitchen.

his anger showing itself by the way he slammed the teakettle down on the stove.

"Don't you ever drink coffee?" she asked, restrained aggression showing in her clenched hands.

"No, I hate coffee. I drink tea." He reached for a cup and the box of tea bags. "I also happen to love loose tea, which you don't seem to have. Why?"

"I don't know. I can't imagine you liking it. I always thought of it as a woman's drink."

"You *what*?" he roared, his dark brown eyes bigger than she had ever seen them. "By damn! That's it! I've had just about as much as I can stand. Tonight, you pushed me almost to the brink by flirting with that wimp in the bar, and now you attack my masculinity!"

Caro backed up, but J.T. came toward her, matching her step for step.

"I've been more patient than I have ever been before in my life. I thought you were emotionally young, too inexperienced to know what you were doing. What you really need is a man who's stronger than you are. Someone to overpower that strong personality and that perfectly formed body. You need me, no doubt about it."

He struck with the swiftness of a cobra, locking her arms in a viselike grip.

"J.T., please let go. You're hurting me," she murmured softly, imploring him.

"Now," he muttered, "I'm going to make love to you."

"No, wait," she protested, frightened and excited at the same time.

"Now."

He had her in his arms and up the stairs before she realized what was

happening. She knew she had been pushing him, hoping for just this reaction. She had wanted him to take responsibility for the decision out of her hands, to take her over, and make love to her. She suddenly needed his hands on her, touching, caressing, exploring. And her hands itched to touch him in the same way.

Her slender arms found their way around his neck. "Don't change your mind," she whispered.

He shook his head slowly. "I won't. Not now. Not ever."

He stood her by the side of the bed. They devoured each other with their heated gazes and then undressed each other, his hands fumbling with the buttons of her shirt every time she fumbled with his. They undid each other's belts, then reached for the snaps of each other's jeans. Their hands tested the texture of each other's skin, the tautness, the softness, the nearness. . . .

They melded together, arms and legs sensuously entwined, as J.T. stretched her out on the wide bed. Both her hands were captured by one of his, then imprisoned high above her head. His eyes turned brilliant as they slowly explored her totally bared body, finding a mole here, a dimple there.

"Don't look at me like that," she said. "You'll find something wrong."

"Never." His voice was like warm water.

He kissed her ear, her arched throat, his lips trailing down her shoulder, and she felt him tremble with passion. A light, airy feeling of wonder encompassed her.

She itched to touch him as intimately as his lips were touching her, to feel the muscles below his skin stretch

and bunch. She needed to absorb his strength. "Let go of me," she pleaded, awed at her own responses.

"No."

"I want to touch you."

"No. Not yet." His mouth was against her breast, his warm breath teasing her already taut nipple, his rough tongue tempting it to attention.

"Why? Why can't I touch you?"

"Because I know what will happen." His words were almost lost against her white skin. "You're beautiful." His hand trailed molten heat over her thigh and crested over her softly rounded abdomen. "So very beautiful."

She arched her back, silently begging to touch him. Still he wouldn't let her arms go.

His lips touched one spot, then another, his head moving ever downward. His body shivered and suddenly he freed her hands and held her close, hugging her until she conformed intimately to his own very masculine contours.

She sighed, reveling in being able to touch him at last. It was as good as she had expected. His body was firm beneath her hand, his skin taut and hard. Her palms glanced over him as if she were reading him in braille, finding contours and basking in the difference between his and hers. He continued to teach her, guiding her hands as his own continued to travel her body.

"Do you like me to touch you here? Here? What about here?" He whispered away all her fears and made her bolder in return. "Tell me, Caro...and I'll tell you."

She murmured her shy answers and he understood. The emotional con-

nection between them surpassed even their physical passions.

When he took her in total possession, Caro was more than ready. She cried out for him and he answered as a man does, with his thrust of ownership, branding her as his. She responded by allowing him to conquer her in the age-old action. It was a heady rise to unknown heights before a slow descent to earth.

"Good," he murmured into the softness of her hair as he held her. "It was good."

Caro didn't speak. She was held securely in the cradle of his arms, and they slept, she with one hand tangled in the mat of hair on his chest and he clasping a small, firm breast in the palm of his hand.

LARGE, slightly roughened hands woke her from slumber and husky words were whispered in her ear. "I need you again."

Images of the night before and the wicked, wonderful things he had done flashed through her mind, then connected somehow with his stroking, erotic caresses to blend into physical perfection.

A small noise just louder than a sigh eased through Caro's mouth. No other words were needed.

He took her with the same tenderness as before, but this time his hands were more knowing, infinitely more subtle in their approach.

It was even more wonderful the second time. And more frightening, because she wanted him so much.

When the sun broke over the mountains, Caro was just waking. She immediately realized that the warmth that had been close to her all night was

gone. She raised her head, already sensing that he wasn't in the bedroom or the bathroom. Everything was silent.

Caro put her hands behind her head and stared out the window at the beautiful Utah mountains. Joseph. He was perfect. He was wonderfully considerate and totally attentive. Charming and masculine. And he was virile. He was, in fact, fantastic!

And she seemed to want him as much as he wanted her. It was a crazy sort of emotional pull that had controlled her from the first moment she had seen him. Was this what women meant when they said fate had brought them together with their mates?

Her smile drifted away as she faced the real problem: She was *too* emotionally connected to him. It was the first time she had ever felt that way about anyone, and the feelings were threatening. She felt as if she were on a backpacking trip without supplies or a map. She didn't know what to do.

J.T. WAITED impatiently for the phone to be answered by a groggy young voice. "Brandon? J.T. Get your tail over to Mike Avery's office and pick up the money I left for you. Then pick up Toni, assuming she's still interested in you, and get out of Utah for at least the next year or I might decide to tell Mom and Pop about your 'business dealings.' Treat Toni right, Brandon. Write the folks monthly and we'll see you in a year. Oh, Brandon? Do something with your life, will you?" Joseph hung up, weary of this mess with his baby brother.

He crammed his hands into his empty pockets and left the pay phone

outside the motel to begin the long walk back to Caro's house.

He was a fine one to tell Brandon how to lead his life. Look at the mess he was in. He kicked a rock and sent it hurtling along his path. What he didn't want to face were his emotions about this fiasco. He had never felt such a strong pull toward anyone as he'd experienced with Caro. It was as if a ton of lead invaded his legs every time she entered the room. He felt tongue-tied and clumsy and his hands constantly itched to touch her smooth skin, to feel the melting honey of her flesh. His stomach knotted at the thought. His pulse rate rose. His step quickened.

She was waiting for him at the house.

*

J.T. SPENT the next week with Caro and it was glorious. But work, both his and hers, continued to intrude on their lives. On Tuesday J.T. stood by, patiently waiting for her to get off the phone so he could use it.

"We've got to stop meeting this way," he muttered as she put the receiver down and he took it.

"Wait! I have other calls to make."

"And you have an office you can go to. I'm here and can't get to mine." His expression turned sheepish. "Of course I can get to my office. It's only forty miles down the road!" he exclaimed, softening at her stricken look. "I've been so wrapped up in your corner of the world that I almost forgot about mine."

"I thought you were going to stay here," she said. "Or was that only when I said I wanted you to leave?"

"Are you telling me that you want me to stay now?" His hands went to her waist.

"I just want to know what your plans are for future reference," she lied, hoping that she wasn't giving away the panic she felt at the thought of him leaving.

Now his hands caressed the sides of her face as he studied her. "I'm only leaving for the day. I'll be back by dinnertime." His voice was low and gentle, as if he realized that she was frightened of this change in their tenuous relationship. He couldn't quite understand why she should be so frightened, but he'd find out in time. He'd make her open up enough to tell him.

THAT EVENING, Caro's friend and neighbor, Brenda Settles, sat at a table chatting with her and J.T. before the Loose Moose became really crowded.

"So how did you two meet?" Brenda sent Caro a knowing look, her bright blue eyes lit with the expectation of a romantic story.

J.T.'s brown eyes twinkled. "I walked into a restaurant in Salt Lake City with a beautiful brunette, but I couldn't take my eyes off a solitary, petite, and utterly charming woman across from me." His eyes told Caro that he remembered every detail. "She was wearing a black dress and her hair was elegantly styled. I knew this was the girl I wanted to meet."

Caro had the grace to blush. So he had known who she was before he introduced himself! Or had he?

She smiled sweetly, playing her part. "Yes, it was as if we were destined to meet that night."

He nodded slowly in acquiescence, his gaze narrowing as he attempted to second-guess her.

His next words dropped like a bomb. "Yes, and now I can't imagine life without her."

"Does that mean congratulations are in order?" Brenda's blue eyes widened. "When's the day?"

"That's up to Caro." J.T. smiled, his hand rubbing her arm sensuously. "We haven't discussed it yet."

Caro's mind was a shambles; she was unable to put two coherent words together. A small part of her was traitorously warmed by his implication, but the rest of her wanted to take her chair and hit him directly over the head with it.

Just then J.T. looked up. Her smile worried him more than her anger or dark thoughts. He could understand most of her reactions, but how would she react to the hint of marriage in her future? It would be an understatement to say that she was opposed to the idea. He contemplated his beer glass. "Caro has decided to have children right away, even though I'm hesitant."

Brenda glanced between the two as if watching a Ping-Pong match. "Oh?"

Caro's eyes flickered with indecision, but finally she decided to roll with whatever J.T. said and worry about the consequences later.

"Yes, if we decide that this is what we both want, J.T. has promised to put aside his lucrative accounting career for the sake of our children and help during the day." She smiled at the astonished look on Brenda's face, not to mention the startled flicker in J.T.'s eyes. "He's going to be such a wonderful father." Something goaded her

to continue the farce. "And he'll help with the delivery, of course. He doesn't want to miss a thing!"

By this time Brenda was chuckling out loud. "Come on, you two!"

J.T. grinned back. "But it's true, Brenda. I'll help in the delivery and I'm a fine cook and bottle washer." He gave Caro a sweet, just-for-lovers look.

Brenda's blue eyes suddenly glistened with challenge. "Well, in that case, let me tell you that I'll be teaching the Lamaze class in the meeting room of the tennis club this winter. If you're really interested, let me have your card and I'll give you a call."

It was J.T. and Caro's turn to be speechless. Caro glanced at him before looking back at Brenda. "When did you begin doing that?"

"About three months ago." Brenda turned to J.T. "I had my own children that way, as Caro knows, and decided to help others do the same thing. It's really marvelous!" She held out her hand. "Your card?"

"Fine," he said, handing her a business card.

Brenda's face showed her disappointment. She had obviously thought she had called his bluff.

Caro suddenly stood. "Well, I'd better get to work on the books or Sam will get angry." Her smile was short and false. "See you and Ken later, Brenda." She nodded curtly. "J.T., I'll call you when I'm through."

He scraped his chair back. "I'm sure Brenda will understand if I want to be with you, darling." He turned on his magic smile. "Won't you?"

The dark-haired girl waved her hand. "Be my guest. I'm just waiting for Ken to arrive."

It seemed to take an eternity to cross the floor casually and walk into the office, Caro thought. But once they were inside, J.T. spoke.

"If I hadn't handed her my card she would have known we had no plans of any kind and you would have given our child a black eye he or she doesn't need. This is a small town, Caro, and this way, when our relationship doesn't work out, I'll be the bad guy and our child won't be an object of scorn."

"Oh, come on!" Caro exclaimed. "I find it hard to believe that marriage is necessary in today's world."

"I find it hard to believe that there are still people who are prejudiced against women in business, but I bet you could tell me a few horror stories."

"That has nothing to do with children!"

"Doesn't it? Just because you read about famous people having children outside wedlock doesn't mean that middle Americans can get away with it."

Caro held her temples. "Why do you always confuse me? I think I have everything worked out and then you hit me with something else."

His arms came around her. "Because you haven't seen the problem from all angles, honey. But in time, you will," he soothed, his voice low.

She finally allowed herself to go limp. His hands were doing wondrous things to her back. She leaned against him, wanting to do so emotionally as well. He was good at guiding...and she was so tired of being alone.

"J.T.?" she said against his shirt. "Keep holding me. Just keep holding me." She reveled in the feeling of his hard body next to hers.

"Caro? I don't want to startle you, but I'm going to pick you up and walk to the couch. Then I'm going to lay you down."

"Uh-hmmm," she moaned softly, and then she was in his arms. J.T. flipped off the overhead light and sent the room into darkness.

"I bet you do this with all the girls," she breathed.

"All of them," he confirmed, and her tension slowly eased away as his lips came down to claim hers in possessive ecstasy.

After laying her down, his lightly callused hands blazed a new trail as they searched her tightly muscled abdomen. Her hands rested on his as he continued his quest. She loved the feel of his touch on her body, more so with the knowledge that they had probably created a tiny child there. His hands continued their magic, searching higher to fondle one perfectly shaped breast.

"Oh, Caro, I need you," he muttered into her soft mouth before giving her another kiss. "But not here, not like this." His strong arms encircled her slim body and held her close. "Did you know that your skin tastes like a sweetened lemon?" he teased.

"No. But yours tastes like a salted pinecone." She entered into the spirit of the exchange.

"I think we've both been oversoaping," he chuckled.

The door was pushed open, spilling a trail of light into the room. Caro attempted to sit up, but J.T. held her shoulders. "How's it going, Sam?" he said calmly.

"Jus' fine," Sam drawled, squinting to see them before his eyes wid-

ened in surprise. "I was just wonderin' where Caro had gone."

"She's fine. We're just relaxing," J.T. assured him. "If it's all right with you, I'm going to take her home. She'll be back in the morning to do the books and ordering. You need me to do anything before we leave?"

"Naw, just take her home and let her rest. Everything's under control. It's a good idea, her working in the morning. More civilized," he mused.

"Thanks, Sam," she murmured, relaxing back in Joseph's lap with a sigh. "See you tomorrow."

FOR CARO, the pattern of the days was set. In the morning she would fuss over a big breakfast. Then J.T. would leave for Salt Lake City and she would go to the club to order supplies and do the books. By late afternoon she was home, and by early evening J.T. was back. They would spend a leisurely evening together, with never an awkward moment from the time he walked in until the time they went to bed. Some nights they made passionate love and other nights he just held her in his arms, his mouth teasing her temple with a kiss as he sighed in contentment. It was a time of absolute magic.

One day, the telephone rang just before J.T. was due home.

"Hello, is Mr. Joseph Cole there?" a voice asked.

"No, he's not. May I take a message?" Alarms sounded in her head. Cole? J.T. was related to Brandon Cole! His last name wasn't Thomas, as she had thought.

"I need to reach him immediately. Are you one of his secretaries?" the woman asked.

Caro took a deep breath. "He should be here shortly. May I have him call you?"

"Please. Tell him his mother called. I need Joseph home as soon as possible. I don't want to alarm him, but his father isn't well. You will tell him, won't you?"

"Yes, yes, of course I will," she muttered. "By the way, how is Brandon?" She threw the bait out almost hoping it wouldn't be grabbed.

But it was. "Fine," the older woman said absently. "I know how Joseph worries about the family. I'm sure he'll understand that business will have to wait for a little while."

"I'm sure he will," Caro repeated. She replaced the receiver and walked over to the window to stare out at the mountains.

Brandon's brother. Why hadn't she guessed? He had entered into this strange setup in order to protect his own flesh and blood from her clutches. Reason made her accept the fact that he had stayed because of an attraction to her. She wasn't *that* blind. But she *had* been used.

Caro knew that it would make no sense for J.T. to refuse to go to his father when he was ill. But as unreasonable as it sounded, she also knew that it would be just the first step in locking her out of his life. She still took second place. All the old, childish, hurting feelings were there again, showing themselves in self-pity and anguish. She thought she had outgrown those emotions, but in fact she was so jealous she could hardly control the pain.

Over the years Caro had sought all the things she once believed were for others and not for her. She had found

the roots she'd wanted. She had found the beginnings of a family in Sam. Why couldn't she be happy with that? Why did she need to have everything? Wasn't the fact that she was almost certain she was carrying Joseph's baby enough? Did she have to try to hold on to Joseph, too?

She wiped away the hot tears that were suddenly cascading down her cheeks. It was time she faced the fact that she'd been living in a dream world and putting off the inevitable.

It was time to break away from J.T. Cole.

*

J.T. STOOD just inside the living room doorway, hands splayed on his hips.

"What the hell do you mean, you want to end this before it turns into a relationship! What do you think it is now?"

Her voice and face were calm. "I think it could be the beginning of something that I don't want to get into. And this is the perfect time to end it. Your parents need you, and I now know I'm not pregnant."

His eyes narrowed on her. "How do you know?"

"The usual way a woman knows," Caro lied. "Besides, I've decided to give up the idea. I'm too old and too settled to have a child upsetting my routine. It was just a dream—one that came too late in life."

"You didn't seem to think you were too old to have a baby four weeks ago."

"I hadn't thought it through," she explained.

"And now you want me to quietly pack my bags and never darken your

door again? After everything we've felt for each other?"

"Yes."

He raked an impatient hand through his hair. His air of confused puzzlement was an agony to watch, making her far more vulnerable than she could cope with for much longer. She turned to the window with tear-blurred eyes. "Don't make this any harder than it already is, J.T.," she pleaded.

But his hands clamped down on her shoulders, spinning her around to face him. "Damn it, Caro! This doesn't make sense! We have something special going! We shouldn't leave it now."

"What do we have, J.T.? Sex? Love?" she asked, her eyes searching his face. "Do you love me or do you love to make love to me? Which is it?"

He struggled to put his answer into words. "I know I love to make love to you. You know that, too. I feel warm, protective, and loving toward you. If that's what love is, then I love you. But I haven't had a chance to analyze my feelings at this point."

She refused to allow her face to show the searing pain she felt. If he didn't love her now, then he certainly wouldn't next week or the week after, or even in six months, when she would look bulky and swollen with his child....

"In that case, you should leave now, before we become any more involved with each other. You know we have very little in common, certainly not enough to base a long-term relationship on."

"And do you want a long-term relationship, Caro?" His voice softened as he watched her face. She could camouflage a lot, but not everything.

Anger was her only recourse. "No. I don't want *any* relationship! You're the one who walked in here and switched around my original terms! This was never supposed to be, don't you see?" she argued. "I want you to leave now. I promise I won't try to contact your family or your brother. I just want my life back the way it was!"

His eyes widened in understanding when she mentioned his brother. "You're angry because I didn't tell you my name, aren't you?"

"I was irritated about that, yes," she admitted. "But it wasn't the end of the world."

"I didn't realize you would take Thomas for my last name," he explained. "But when you did, I let it slide. I was going to tell you as soon as I thought you could cope with it."

"I'm coping with it now. I just want you to leave so I won't have to cope with that or anything else you may or may not have told me. I don't want you here."

"You're frightened of how close we've become," he murmured softly.

"No. You obviously think there's something deeper in our relationship than I do. I feel nothing but an immense irritation at the way you've upset my life! Now please call your mother."

Her words were like a slap in his face. "My God, you mean it!" His look of understanding turned to incredulity and then, finally, to disgust. "You've cut yourself off from people for so long, Caro, that you can't respond to them with honest emotions anymore. I bow in defeat to you. Your wall is too high for me to scale." He turned to walk back to the hallway. "Besides, I'm not sure that the effort

would be worth the prize," he said coldly as he looked her up and down.

CARO SAT in the darkened living room until long past midnight. The tears she thought would have been dry by then continued to fall. She would just get herself under control, and they would come again.

She had watched him take his suitcase to the car, thinking of a thousand different ways to keep him there. All of them meant that she would have to say the three words she never wanted him to hear from her. *I love you*. And it was true.

But love never did anything but hurt.

In the days that followed, an aching loneliness was always with Caro, but it was especially bad in the early evening, when she sat down at the dinner table by herself. At those times she would remember how J.T.'s eyes would light on her when he came through the door after work. Caro finally began taking her plate into the living room, sitting in front of the TV to help focus her attention on something, anything, besides him.

But the worst was yet to come. Her bedroom was sterile, empty, without J.T. Every night she tossed and turned, unable to escape him even in her dreams. He was everywhere. Only when she dreamed that he held her in his arms did she give a ragged sigh and sleep contentedly.

She counted the days that had passed since he'd pulled out of the driveway and out of her life. Four. Five. Six. Seven. See, she could make it! she told herself. On the evening of the seventh day she celebrated her

hard-won freedom by sipping a glass of wine as she watched the sunset.

When the phone rang she answered it tiredly but without qualms, priding herself on her control.

"All right, Caro. I give up." J.T.'s voice was tired too, and laced with irritation. "The only way we're going to get any sleep is if we get married."

Her hand gripped the receiver. "Oh? And who says I'm not sleeping well?"

"I do," he answered. "I've passed your house late at night and seen the lights blazing. If you're holding out for marriage, I'm willing."

Pain froze her throat. "I'm not holding out for marriage, J.T. I never was. All I wanted was a baby, and I've even changed my mind about that." Had she ever. Now she needed this baby just to keep her link with the world.

The line was silent for a moment; then J.T. spoke again. "Caro, what if I want the marriage? What if I've decided that I need that type of commitment?" He knew immediately that his words had been ill-chosen. What he needed had nothing to do with trying to convince her of what she needed.

"Do me a favor, Mr. Cole, and don't call again." Her voice was stiff with outrage, hurt, and an emotion she refused to put a name to. "I've only made a few mistakes in my life, and you were one of the biggest. Rest assured that I won't bother you or your family, and I expect the same courtesy from you. I'd appreciate it if you would disappear—forever!" She slammed the phone down just as the sobs worked their way out through her pain-ridden throat. She slid to the floor, wrapping her arms around her legs, head resting on her knees.

He undoubtedly thought she had set out to trap him, seal him to her with his child! How conniving, how cunning he must think she was! And how rotten *he* was for thinking such a thing! Yet she loved him with all her body and soul. And though he didn't love her, he desired her enough to marry her. A wry smile passed quickly over her lips. He certainly wouldn't learn to love her if he found out that she had kept his child a secret from him! He might even go to court and attempt to take it away from her! No, no matter how much she loved him, they must never meet again. Her hand gently rubbed her still flat stomach. It was best for all three of them.

DR. PATTERSON smiled broadly at Caro and leaned back in her chair. "You're six weeks pregnant, Caro," she said, "and I bet you're already as pleased about this baby as I'm pleased for you."

Caro chuckled, the first excitement she had felt all week glowing in her unusually pale face. "Of course. Now I need to know what I should be eating, how often I should see you . . . oh, so many things!"

"Hold it." The taller, older woman laughed. "We'll get into all of that, but first we have some papers to fill out, and I need to know how you want this child brought into the world."

"Natural childbirth," Caro said. "I may never have another child. I don't want to miss a thing!"

The doctor began scribbling on the chart. "Somehow I knew you'd say that. I'll turn your name and due date over to Brenda Settles and she'll contact you about Lamaze classes. You'll

start those when you reach your seventh month, in February."

The next five months were slow to pass. Caro continued to work hard getting ready to open her new club in Snowhawk on New Year's Eve. Her preoccupation with the club and its workings was only a shield, however, against the loneliness that still invaded her thoughts whenever she remembered J.T. She wouldn't have traded that time with him for the whole world, but the ache that it had left in her heart was sometimes almost too much to bear. She loved him totally, completely. And the life that stirred inside reminded her of that love every day.

"DAMN IT, Mike! If you can't get this contract right, then let me know and I'll hire someone else to write it up!" J.T. exclaimed as he threw a sheaf of papers down on his already cluttered desk. He had called Mike to his office as an attorney, but they both knew he was taking out his anger toward Caro as only one friend could to another.

"I can only get it right, J.T., if you give me all the terms you and this customer discussed." Mike stood, containing his own anger. J.T. hadn't been himself since he'd left Caro's side, but that didn't mean that he could take out his frustrations on everyone else! "Write me a memo on your changes and I'll get right on it," he snapped. "Otherwise you can take it up with another lawyer." He began to walk away.

"Mike!" J.T.'s voice stopped the man in midstride. "You're right, it was my fault for not giving you the correct information."

Mike grinned.

"I also owe you another apology," J.T. said, "concerning Caro. I said she was a lot of things she isn't and you tried to correct my initial opinion. I wasn't listening."

"Are you now?"

J.T. nodded.

"Then why don't you go back and see her?"

"No. She made it perfectly clear that she doesn't want to see me again."

"Are you sure the lady wasn't protesting too much?" Mike sat down again. "Did you tell her that you loved her?"

"No! My God, if she knew that she'd really have laughed me out of the house! As it was I barely got away with my dignity intact." A thought suddenly came to him and he shot a narrowed look at Mike. "She hasn't tried to sign anyone else up for that crazy scheme of hers, has she?"

The young attorney hid his smile with effort. Jealousy stuck out a mile on J.T. "No. She did say something odd, though." Mike looked puzzled. "She wanted to verify that you had signed the contract. I said yes, and that I had a copy in her file. She just said, 'Good,' and that she would get in touch with me later."

J.T.'s stomach lurched. He'd kept on hoping that something would happen, that he would walk into a restaurant or a store and see her. He had imagined their meeting hundreds of times. They would stop and talk and she would remember with a smile just how foolish she had been. And he would recall all the times he had almost called but hadn't. And they would laugh and pick up the pieces. He would take her to bed and hold her in his arms, feel the rich-

ness of her skin again, lose himself inside the moist silkiness of her...

The buzzer sounded and brought J.T. out of his reverie. "Yes, Sara?" he said to his secretary.

"There's a woman on line two calling to remind you about a class you signed up for last summer. Her name is Brenda Settles."

J.T. stood completely still. "I'll take it, Sara," he confirmed, punching the hold button. "Mike, as my attorney, I want you to hear this."

He punched another button, and the conversation filled the room. "Hello, Brenda. How are you?"

"I was worried that you might not remember me, J.T." Brenda giggled.

"I always remember small brunettes with husbands named Ken and girlfriends named Caro," he teased. "How are you, and how are your classes going?"

"Well, that's what I'm calling about. I haven't seen Caro, but I had a call from her physician telling me that she's ready to attend the childbirth classes. I'm just checking to see if you're attending." She hesitated at his silence. "She needs someone to act as a coach and, well, you did say that you wanted to be with her..."

"Excuse me, Brenda, if I sound a little startled. I'm just back from a business trip and haven't shifted mental gears yet. I didn't realize that Caro was so far along." The lie slipped out easily. How far into the pregnancy could she be? Six months?

Brenda twittered again. "I know you men. Well, Caro really is seven months along now, so she's right on time for her classes."

J.T. stared at Mike, who colored but gave his shoulders a jerk that meant he

knew nothing about it. "I see." J.T.'s mind spun quickly. "I'll be there, Brenda. Give me the date and time. And by the way, thanks for calling." He hung up.

"Can I sue her for custody despite the contract, Mike?" he asked quietly, his rage contained for the moment.

"I can't advise you, J.T. I'm also Caro's attorney," Mike hedged.

"Damn it! You're my friend! *Can I sue her?*"

"Yes!"

The steam of J.T.'s building emotions was expelled by that single word. "Thanks," was all he said.

*

FOUR COUPLES sat in the wooden chairs that were grouped in a corner of the room, and all of them seemed as excited and nervous as Caro was.

Brenda stood to one side, waiting for everyone to settle down. She gave Caro a solemn wink as she guided a reluctant Sam to two empty chairs at the side. Tonight was to be orientation for all future meetings. Caro just hoped that Brenda wouldn't ask where J.T. was. Sam had agreed to come to the first few sessions, but not to be her coach. He would be a stand-in until she could find someone else for that function. Right now he was just moral support.

Brenda caught her eye and grinned as she made a circle with her forefinger and thumb. Caro smiled in return, trying not to look puzzled. What did that mean?

"All right, prospective parents," Brenda said as she glanced at her watch and then at the door. "We'll begin now, because there's so much to cover tonight. I'd like to start by having ev-

everyone tell what they expect from this class and why they chose this method of giving birth. Donna, will you start us off?"

As Donna answered and her husband Bob gave his stumbling rendition of the same tune, all eyes swiveled to focus on the newcomer standing in the door.

"Come in, come in," Brenda called. "I didn't know if you were going to make it tonight or not."

It was with a sense of fatalism that Caro finally turned to see who the others were watching. Her face slowly turned a parchment white before she blushed at being caught red-handed, like a small child in the act of doing something very, very wrong.

"I'm sorry I'm late," J.T. murmured to Brenda with a quick, pseudo-apologetic smile as he walked toward Caro. "You can go back to the Loose Moose, Sam. I'll handle it from here." Sam grinned, stood, and relinquished his chair with a look of relief.

J.T. sat and stared straight ahead, toward Brenda. Within seconds, everyone's attention was once more focused on Bob. Everyone's attention but Caro's.

She sat with her hands clenched in her lap, hoping that the small nerve that jumped in her wrist wouldn't show. But it did. J.T. let her know by placing his finger on the beat. It looked like a gesture of love, but she knew better. He was telling her that she deserved to be frightened. To Caro's further embarrassment, the baby chose that moment to give a healthy kick. J.T.'s arm was pushed only slightly, but it was enough for him to feel the miracle of it.

His eyes widened as he waited in awe for the next kick, which occurred almost immediately. His hand left her fingers to rest on the spot and feel the movement, his ungarded expression clearly showing his sense of wonder. Caro stiffened at the intimate contact until she saw his face out of the corner of her eye. The depth of his emotions had brought a shine of tears to his eyes. This was *his child*! He was totally spellbound with the thought of their creation. His hand shook slightly as he finally lifted it from her stomach. In exchange he took her hand in his and held it tightly, almost to the point of hurting her, as he made a giant effort to compose himself.

And Caro knew he had every right to be angry with her. He had done everything the way she'd asked. He had signed the release papers, kept out of her business. He had helped her both physically and emotionally. All that he had asked was that the baby be conceived naturally and that he be allowed to stay until its birth. And she hadn't even had the courage to tell him she was pregnant! She glanced at him again, and this time her eyes were caught by his. They spoke volumes to each other as long-pent-up emotions and thoughts that had never been uttered flew between them. She knew then that he would be there for every class and she also knew that she would accept him back into her life. Neither one of them had a choice. They hadn't realized it, but all the choices had disappeared into thin air when they first met, and only one path was open to them now.

Now they could only try to bridge the gap that time had made. Now she would try to bring him up to date on

the growth of his child and he would tell her what slot he wanted to fill in her life. And she would agree, no matter what, because having him with her was the most completely right feeling she had ever experienced. So what if his family called him back to their side later? So what if he left her for the closeness a lifetime had forged? She would have him with her now, and would give him something he had never had before: a child.

"Peace?" she whispered.

"For now," he answered softly. "But you have a lot to answer for."

"Don't we all," she whispered in return.

THE FIVE-MINUTE drive back to Caro's house was the longest and quietest she had ever known.

"The kitchen," he ordered, as they went in. "I want some hot tea with plenty of sugar." She obeyed wordlessly.

Before Caro could turn around, J.T. was filling the teakettle and setting it on the stove to boil.

"Let's get this over with, J.T.," she prodded. "I'm exhausted and I want to get some sleep." Suddenly a thought occurred to her. She had been betrayed. "Sam told you about the baby, didn't he?"

"No. Sam never said a thing. The only news I could glean from him was that you were healthy and still in business. Damn his tough old hide!"

"Then how...?"

"Your friend Brenda had my card. Remember? Only she hadn't seen you in so long she didn't know that we weren't together, let alone that I had no knowledge of my own child."

"All right. Now what?"

"Now I move back in, coach you in childbirth, remain until the baby is born, and see that everything is as it should be. Then I receive unlimited visitation rights. I won't ask you again to marry me, only to be turned down by your viper's tongue. I learned my lesson the first time."

It took her a moment to absorb his words. Her anger dissolved, leaving unshed tears in its wake as she felt her spirits plummet. He didn't want her or the child. He just wanted to do what was right. "I see," she muttered.

"I doubt that very much," he said dryly. "But right now I want an explanation. Did you know you were pregnant when you asked me to leave?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you do it? What did you hope to gain by kicking me out of your life?"

"Peace," she answered instantly.

"Explain," he said curtly.

She began slowly, haltingly. "You upset my life. I've lived by myself too long to have someone else interfere with the running of it. You were telling me when to work, when to go to bed."

"Correction: when to make love. You could have gone to bed whenever you wanted."

"Whatever." She whisked the idea away with a wave of her hand. "Then you would go off to slay dragons somewhere, expecting me to be here when you returned."

"Correction two: *hoping* you'd be here when I returned. You did the expecting, Caro, by trying to live up to what you thought you should do. You have some preconceived notion of what a family should be like, and you were determined to act that out."

With a blinding flash of insight Caro knew he was right. "Perhaps I did," she admitted wearily. "What good does it do to rake it all up now?"

"Because now we're starting over. I'm moving back in tomorrow and I will remain here until after the baby is born. You owe me that, Caro. I'm the father of that child and I had a right to be here. You denied me that right."

"Fine! All right! You're here now!" she shouted. "Just don't expect to stay with me for a few days, then run off to your family or another girlfriend and expect me to allow you back in!" Her face paled. She hadn't meant to say that.

"You were angry about my mother's phone call, is that it?"

"No!" she denied too quickly and far too loudly.

"I don't believe you. The night before her call we made love together. Beautiful, natural love. The following morning you woke up in my arms and I knew you felt the same way I did. I knew it." He voiced his thoughts aloud, as if she weren't even in the same room. "Emotions that run as deep as ours aren't something you can hide—except in anger. When I left for work I had several stops to make along the way. It wasn't until late in the day that I found out my father was ill. And when I got home, you had changed. Drastically." He stared at her, his eyes searching for answers.

"But the one thing that stands out in my mind was the fear that showed in your eyes. I thought you were afraid of me. But it wasn't that, was it? The one thing you wanted, a family, was within your reach, and you were suddenly terrified that it wouldn't live up to your dreams and expectations. Better to re-

ject it and be lonely the rest of your life than to have to live with the reality of it. I should have known."

"You're wrong," she denied hoarsely.

"Then explain it to me, Caro. I'll listen. You cared for me. I know you did. All this time I thought I rushed you when I asked you to marry me, but that wasn't it. What was it? It couldn't have been the fact that I desired you so much, that I wanted to hold you constantly. You didn't seem to mind that as much as you do now."

She gave a short laugh, her eyes glued to the dark, curly hair peeping over the partially opened collar of his shirt. She couldn't bear to see what was in his eyes. "Oh, of course. I'm so desirable now that you can't wait to get your hands on me." It was the first time she had regretted her pregnancy.

His hands rose to rest on her slender shoulders. "Does it show that much?" he asked quietly.

Her startled eyes locked with his. Was he laughing at her?

No, his expression answered, he wanted her. Her heart swelled as she realized the depth of his desire. Slowly, cautiously, he enfolded her in the comfort of his arms, his cheek resting against hers as if it belonged there. She didn't realize that she had wrapped her arms around his waist until she felt the pressure of his buckle against her.

"I've missed you so much, Caro. So much," he whispered. She knew just what he meant. Hadn't she felt the same way? Hadn't she hurt so terribly that she couldn't sleep nights or laugh during the long, lonely days?

Casually, slowly, they turned and walked hand in hand toward the stairs

and up to the bedroom that they had, it seemed now, always shared.

The bedroom was dark. Light from the hallway gave just enough illumination to show the outlines of the furniture.

J.T. began unbuttoning his shirt with one hand, the other still holding hers. Suddenly she was frightened, embarrassed. Was he remembering her as she had been? Would he laugh at the rotund, comical figure she now presented?

"Tell me," he said softly, realizing that she was struggling with something.

"I don't want you to see me this way."

"You're more beautiful now than ever. Why be shy?"

"I'm clumsy and awkward and I don't think I'll light many fires looking like this." She tried to joke about it.

"I made you like this. Won't you let me take pride in what I helped to create?" His voice was gentle, teasing. His thumb rubbed against the palm of her hand in a sensuous, rhythmic motion.

Her movements were jerky and painful as she undressed in the dimness, but before she could slip between the sheets, J.T. was with her, holding her close, touching her with the intimacy of his own body. His hands traced every contour before he filled them with her soft breasts. A sigh escaped him as he realized their tender fullness. When his hands left them they traveled downward until they were played across her stomach. She was mesmerized by his gentle contact with her. Nothing she had ever dreamed of had prepared her for his awe at the child they had created.

He slowly fell to one knee, his head resting on her belly as if he were listening for the child to speak. "Our child, Caro. A child that only you and I could have created together," he whispered.

Caro's hands rested lightly on his shoulders as tears flooded her eyes. She had tried to cheat J.T. of all the love he had to give. But what was worse, she had tried to cheat her child of its loving father.

His name was wrenched from her lips.

He stood, engulfing her in his arms once more before laying her down on the bed as if she were a piece of rare porcelain. He lay down beside her, his hands moving along a path they had taken before.

"J.T., I don't..." she began to say.

"Hush, darling," he crooned in a low, deep voice. "There are other ways. So many other ways." His assurance relaxed her and she melted against him.

He talked to her, held her, soothingly stroked her. He touched her body from cheek to instep, bringing all the small nerves that had lain dormant inside her vibrantly alive. They continued together up that fantasy hill until they reached the crest, holding their breath at the wonder of each other's touch. And then they gently floated back to earth, held in each other's arms, and slept as they had not been able to for months, deeply and without dreams.

DESPITE THE FACT that Caro didn't know anything about J.T.'s plans after the baby's birth, he kept her constantly informed of his schedule all during this period before the great event. By the end of the day he had

usually called at least twice, always asking the same thing. She grinned broadly when the phone rang. That day was no exception.

"Are you feeling all right? You're not climbing those stairs, are you?"

"Are you going to carry me upstairs when I get too big to walk?" she teased, her hand automatically rubbing her now huge stomach.

"No, I'll rent a crane to sit outside the house." His voice was light and teasing. This was how it would be if they were married.

"Sounds good to me. I suppose the expenses for this service are all yours?" she asked.

"Mine? Not on your life! After all, you make plenty of money. And you're the one who's eating so much."

"Only because some do-gooder keeps telling me I'm eating for two."

"From now on, I'm a changed man," he retorted. His tone of voice changed as he continued. "Tonight we're having a serious discussion, my Caro. So be ready." She instinctively knew that he was going to announce his plans for leaving her. She also realized that she wouldn't be able to get through the evening without breaking down.

She quickly dialed Sam's number, but there was no answer. She tried the club, then the wholesaler's. Sam wasn't at either place. In the middle of dialing Brenda to ask if she and Ken could come to dinner and delay the inevitable, the funny backache she'd had all morning suddenly got stronger. With instinct, Caro knew that this was the baby's time.

Suddenly nothing else mattered! She gave a light-headed laugh. Now! Now was the time she'd been waiting for!

With calm deliberation she dialed the numbers they had kept posted near the phone. It took less than five minutes for her to get in touch with the doctor and the hospital. It took another five to call J.T. He, too, was calm and lucid—until he promised to be home in less than five minutes when they both knew he had a forty-mile drive through the mountains.

Her suitcase was in the hall closet, packed and ready. The car had more than enough gas to manage the three miles to the hospital and Caro had her keys and purse next to the phone. Everything was as it was supposed to be.

Strangely enough, she finally saw the irony of her situation. Now that she was about to have someone else to love she knew that she finally had the courage to speak to J.T. of her love for him. She could say the words: Stay with me and be my husband.

How strange that it had taken a baby to show her how to be a woman.

J.T. was wonderful, helping Caro with her breathing and blowing techniques, slipping small ice cubes into her mouth to ease the dryness, rubbing her arms, shoulders, and back between pains, crooning to her words of encouragement. And when she neared the end of labor and they both could see the child of their making, her pride in their child couldn't be controlled.

"Fine, Caro, now push down one more time! That's it, that's it!" the doctor exclaimed. "You've got a beautiful baby girl, Caro," she said softly.

Caro collapsed against J.T., her energy completely depleted. He cradled her in the comfort and security of his

arms until the baby was handed into Caro's. The baby's wide blue eyes hazily attempted to focus on her mother's nose, to no avail. One small fist flailed the air before five tiny fingers wrapped around J.T.'s larger one.

"Caro, she's beautiful, just like her mother." His voice almost broke.

The doctor and Caro looked at him in surprise.

"Like her mother! J.T., Summer is the spitting image of her father!" Caro chuckled.

"And you've already decided on a name?" he asked softly.

"It was the height of summer when she was conceived. It seemed a perfect choice. It was a perfect time."

His eyes locked with hers as the depth of her meaning became clear.

TWO DAYS LATER Caro was able to go home. She was fine, Summer was fine, and J.T. was nervous. She knew he was nervous because he wouldn't look her in the eye.

The nursery was ready for Summer, and Caro tucked the blanket tighter around the tiny miniature of her father and reluctantly left the room to join J.T. downstairs.

For once she was going to confront her problems head-on and not run away or hide within herself. She was going to force herself to ask him to stay and marry her. Summer needed him. And so did she. Caro knew that, just as she knew she loved him.

She followed the sound of banging pans, her curiosity aroused as she walked into the kitchen.

"Joseph?" she asked.

He was standing by the stove with every burner on. An apron was tied around his waist, an endearing grin on his face.

"Sit down, the teapot's still hot. I'm cooking dinner," he said. "Tonight we're having my only specialty: pork chops in brown gravy with mashed potatoes and butternut squash."

"Dinner?" she repeated stupidly. She had expected him to tell her that he was leaving.

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Will you sit down, Caro? You've just had a baby. Don't you know how to take care of yourself?"

Something in her snapped. "Yes, I can take care of myself, I always have! But right now I want to talk to you, damn it!"

He turned and stared at her. "Touchy, aren't we? Is this part of what they call postpartum depression?"

She ran a hand through her hair. "No." She forced herself to say the words. "I appreciate all you've done for Summer and me, and I want you to know that. But I want more from you."

His chocolate-brown eyes iced over. "Oh?"

Her heart plummeted to her toes. "Never mind, it doesn't matter," she choked out.

"No, go ahead. What is it you want from me? Money? Child support? Palimony?"

"No!" she exclaimed.

"Then what?"

"Never mind!" Anger forced her to stand, but she held on to the table top for stability. "I was going to tell you how much I love you and ask if there was any way you could see yourself as part of our family, but Summer and I don't need you! We don't need anybody!" Tears cascaded down her cheeks, but she didn't feel them. Her

heart was breaking. She turned to leave, wanting to hide in her room.

"Caro! Wait!" Strong, slightly rough hands clamped down on her shoulders.

"Let me go!" she cried.

"Caro, please," he muttered hoarsely, his hands stroking her arms, gentling her movements. "I accept your proposal of marriage."

"Don't tease me, Joseph," she begged.

"I'm not teasing. I love you, I have loved you, and I know that I'll always love you. And if you didn't realize soon that you loved me, I was going to march you down to court and demand that you marry me, anyway."

She turned in his arms so she could face him, her eyes shining in wonder. "Really?"

He nodded. "Really."

Her heart sang. She could see his love in his eyes, feel it in the tender way his hands held her, as if she were a delicate flower that needed his loving care.

J.T. leaned down and lifted her in his arms, carrying her down the hallway and into the living room. He sat her on his lap in the large wingback chair. Her head lay in the crook of his neck and shoulder, and she felt she was exactly where she should be.

"You frightened me, you know," she finally admitted.

"How?"

"You came from a large family and, from what you said, all of you seemed to be close. I always wanted that but never had it. I think I was jealous."

He chuckled. "How anyone could be jealous of having a brother like Brandon is beyond me."

"But you seem so close to your parents," she insisted. "You were the first

person your mother called when your father was ill."

"No, you just assumed that," he corrected. "But I am close to them. I can't help the sort of childhood you had, darling, but I can help make Summer's life better. She'll have aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents. And she'll have us," he promised.

His lips softly caressed her forehead and she sighed with delight. Caro couldn't imagine a better place to be than in her own home, in J.T.'s arms, with Summer upstairs.

She finally broke the silence. "When?"

"When what?"

"When were you going to march me down to court?" she asked impishly.

"Tomorrow. As soon as I thought you were able. I was going to call my mother and have her come and take care of Summer, allowing her grandmother to get to know her. Then I was going to kidnap you and force you to marry me," he admitted unabashedly. "I already applied for the license and had the doctor do all the necessary blood tests when you were in the hospital." He grinned smugly.

"You what?"

He was unrepentant. "You heard me. She and I had a quiet discussion in the hallway after Summer was born. I explained that you were my wife in every sense of the word except one, and I wanted to remedy that. She understood and did the tests. Now I want it understood that even though we have our separate business interests, we are a team in everything else." He kissed the tip of her nose. "In the future I might even sell you on letting me take over the accounting for all your various interests."

"I'd have to see what you have to offer." Her heart sang with the knowledge of his love.

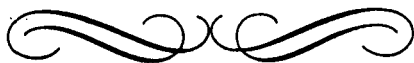
"Plenty. Besides, you already owe me the eight thousand dollars I used to pay off Brandon and get him out of the state for a while."

Her eyes widened. "But, he didn't even—"

"—do his job?" he interrupted. "I know. I just didn't want him around while I did mine: making you see that I was the man you needed to hire. But make no mistake, Caro. Our contract runs forever."

She snuggled closer to his chest, content in the warmth of his love.

Suddenly forever didn't seem nearly long enough.

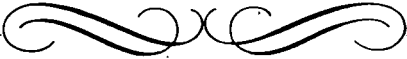




**BARBARA
FAITH
Bedouin
Bride**



Katherine Bishop felt as if she were living a novel when Rashid Ben Hasir kidnapped her and carried her off to the desert. They were two worlds on a collision course, yet their hearts beat as one when they clashed on the shifting sands beneath the star-filled sky.



Katherine saw him just as she reached for the glass of champagne. Her fingers closed around the cool crystal as she turned away. But even then, she felt the terrible force of Rashid Ben Hasir's stare and sensed that he had moved toward her.

"Miss Bishop? It is Miss Bishop, isn't it?"

Katherine turned.

"It's been a long time," he said. "Six years?"

"Seven."

She had forgotten how tall he was, how dark his eyes were. His black hair had touches of silver now and so did the mustache that he had not had before.

"What are you doing in Rabat?" he demanded.

"I'm assistant to the vice-consul at the embassy. I've been here three months."

"Have you seen Jamal?"

"Not yet. Is he here in Rabat?"

"Occasionally. More often in Tangier or Marrakesh. Our family has business interests in both cities."

"I thought I'd wait until I settled in before I got in touch with him. It's been a long time. Perhaps he's forgotten me."

"I doubt that." His dark eyes raked her. "You've changed. I like your hair better this way. You look quite elegant."

"Really?" Katherine's voice mocked him as she thought back to how awkward she'd been seven years ago. Sure

that she was too tall and too thin, she wore bulky sweaters to make herself look heavier, and low heels. Now she bought her clothes in Madrid or Casablanca, and wore high heels with ease. She knew that she looked good tonight in the white cashmere dress that flattered her slender figure. She still wore her wheat-blond hair long and straight, but tonight, she'd drawn it back into a chignon. Gold filigree earrings and necklace added to her white-and-gold look, a startling contrast to Rashid's handsome darkness and his soft gray djellaba, a long robe of fine gabardine.

He was handsome, Katherine realized with a shock, and a head taller than the other men in the room. He wasn't as good-looking as his younger brother, of course. There was none of Jamal's gentleness in his face. He looked as ruthless as Katherine knew he was.

She sipped her champagne, trying to think of some way to escape. Then she heard someone call, "Rashid!" and turned to see her boss, Wade Contney, hurrying toward them.

"I hoped you'd be here tonight," Contney said as he shook Rashid's hand. "Have you met Katherine?"

"I met Miss Bishop several years ago when Jamal was at Princeton. He and Miss Bishop were . . . friends," he finished.

"Leave it to Jamal to find the prettiest girl in New Jersey. I've been half tempted to make Kathy wear a veil

when she goes out. But I don't suppose anything would disguise those yellow eyes."

"Yellow? You're mistaken, Wade. They're golden."

"Yellow or gold, it wouldn't surprise me if one of these days some hot-blooded Arab carries her off into the desert." Wade winked at Katherine. Then he slapped Rashid on the back and said, "Since you two are old friends you can be dinner partners. After dinner we're going to the casino. I hope you'll be Kathy's escort, Rashid."

"Of course. Nothing would give me greater pleasure." His smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

God, how she hated him! But she was trapped by protocol. Kathy worked for the United States Embassy and Rashid was an official for the government of Morocco. If she stepped out of line and insulted a man in Rashid's position, Contney would send her packing.

ON THE OUTSIDE the Casino de Rabat was a beautiful, well-lighted building. The inside, however, was a huge Arab tent draped in red-and-gold brocade. The lighting was dim, the tables knee-high, the chairs and divans low and plush. The faint scent of incense permeated the air.

Because Katherine had made sure the other guests were safely on their way before she left, she and Rashid were the last to arrive.

"I'm sorry," the waiter apologized to Rashid. "But there was an error. I'm afraid there is no room for you and the young lady with your party. But I do have a nice table near the dance floor."

The suggestion of a smile curved Rashid's mouth. "That's quite all right," he said, his hand tightening on Katherine's arm. "This will do nicely, thank you. Will you bring us a bottle of champagne, please? Dom Perignon '79, if you have it."

"Oui, monsieur. Très bien."

A waiter arrived, and after the champagne had been opened and tasted, Rashid motioned him away. He poured a glass and handed it to Katherine. Then he filled his own. "Have you and Jamal kept in touch these past seven years?" he asked.

"No."

"Do you think it's a good idea to see him now? It's—"

"Here you are!" Wade Contney boomed. "Darn shame you're not with us. I raised hell with the head waiter." He grinned at Rashid. "But you two have yourselves a fine evening. Incidentally, Kathy, I told Herr Gutterman you'd see to his problem personally tomorrow morning at ten. All right?"

Her frown was barely noticeable. "Of course, Wade."

Contney left and Rashid said, "You don't like Gutterman?"

"Not particularly. He can't keep his hands to himself."

"Then you shouldn't have to deal with him."

"I have to deal with a lot of people I don't like." Her voice was cool. "It's part of my job."

"Like tonight?"

Katherine shrugged, looking away from him as a five-piece band began to play. But she could feel the anger begin to build, feel the need to strike out against Rashid. She glanced at her watch and said, "I have that appoint-

ment in the morning and there are things I have to do before that. I really must leave now. Please don't bother seeing me home. There are taxis just outside."

"Nonsense. Of course I'll take you home."

He looked around for the waiter who—like waiters all over the world—seemed to disappear the minute Rashid tried to get his attention.

"We might as well have a dance while we're waiting," Rashid said. Before Katherine could object he took her arm and led her out onto the dance floor.

They danced well together. Half a foot taller than she, he held her against his muscled body, his hand firm and warm against her back. When the music stopped he still held her locked in his embrace. Hot color crept to Katherine's cheeks as her eyes met his. She saw the flare of his nostrils and felt herself sway toward him. He seemed about to speak, but then abruptly let her go and led her off the dance floor. He signaled for the waiter and when Katherine said, "I can get a cab," he answered, "Nonsense," and slapped a handful of dirhams onto the table.

They didn't speak until they were in the silver-gray Mercedes coupe. "Where do you live?" he asked.

"On El Jadida. Number twenty-five."

When Rashid stopped in front of her building, he said, "I'll walk you to your door."

"That's not necessary."

But he walked around the car to help her out. With his hand still holding hers, he said, "Jamal will be here on business next week. I'll tell him you're at the embassy."

"Thank you, Rashid." She pulled her hand away.

But he turned and led her into the building. "Where is your apartment?" he asked.

"Upstairs, but—"

He let her precede him, but when she stopped in front of the door he put his hand out for her key and said, "Good night. Thank you for a most interesting evening."

Her face tightened. "Thank you for bringing me home."

As she turned to go in, he put his hand on her arm. "I want to tell you something, Katherine. I want you to know that there was nothing personal when I separated you and Jamal. You were both too young to know what you wanted."

"And now?" She challenged him.

"You don't understand, do you?" He gripped her arms. "It's a question of different cultures, of—"

"Let me go!" Katherine tried to pull away. "Damn you!"

His face was white with anger, but before she could escape his grasp, he pulled her to him and his angry mouth descended on hers in a kiss so fierce she felt her breath catch.

His tongue probed her lips, trying to force them apart and when she resisted, he nipped her bottom lip. She gasped and his tongue, like a warm shaft of fire, invaded her mouth. Then he caught the lip he had injured between his strong white teeth and caressed it with the tip of his tongue. And he kissed her again, his lips warm against hers.

Katherine felt herself sway toward him, felt a traitorous heat creep through her body. She tried to pull away.

Then, almost as abruptly as he had taken her, he let her go. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to do that. You made me angry."

Before she could reply he turned on his heel and descended the stairs.

Katherine stood outside her door until she heard Rashid pull away. When she went in she closed her door and stood there, trembling with reaction. Remembering how it had been that year at Princeton.

Katherine and Jamal had been dating steadily and she had come to adore him.

That Christmas she took him home to Maine to meet her parents. "An A-rab?" her father had said. But once he met Jamal there'd been no problems. He found it fascinating that men in Morocco were allowed four wives. Her mother had been less than charmed by the idea, but softened at her gift of a green-and-gold brocade caftan.

"It's only a small thank-you for allowing me to come into your home," Jamal said. "There are times when I miss my own family and it's warming to be included in your festivities."

"He's a nice boy," her father told her that night after Jamal had gone to the guest room. "A real gentleman. But I can't say as I'd like to see you too interested in a fella who might end up with a whole bunch of wives."

"He explained that to me, Dad. He said maybe one man in two hundred has more than one. Anyway, Jamal and I are only friends."

That wasn't quite true, of course. Katherine liked Jamal a lot more than she wanted to admit, more than any man she'd ever dated.

They continued to see each other all that winter. Jamal would leave in June but Katherine had another year of school. It had been a struggle for her parents to send her to Princeton, even with her partial scholarship, and she'd worked every summer to help. But the last year had been difficult for her father. In February, she received an apologetic letter from him saying he just couldn't scrape up enough money for her final year.

Katherine was tight-lipped with worry for a week. Then she wrote her father to say that it really was all right, she needed a year off to clear her mind and think things over. She'd work for a year, stay at home, then finish her studies at the University of Maine.

She didn't tell Jamal what her plans were.

Winter snows gave way to spring rains and the sweet scent of promise filled the air. One night as they walked back to Katherine's dormitory, Jamal suddenly stopped and pulled her into his arms.

"I love you," he whispered. "Please, Kathy, love me too."

"I do," she breathed. "Oh, Jamal, I do, but . . . you're going back to Morocco and I haven't finished school yet."

"Forget school. Come back to Morocco with me."

"I can't do that."

"Of course you can. We'll be married first."

When she still hesitated he hugged her. "I love you, Kathy, and I want to be with you. I can't stand leaving you every night like this. Please, darling, say yes."

"Yes, Jamal," she said. "Yes, I'll

She telephoned her parents the next day. Her mother, after first bursting into tears, said, "A June wedding! Darling, how wonderful. You *will* be married here in Buckport?"

"Yes, of course. But I only said yes last night. We haven't had time to make any plans."

Kathy's father didn't share her mother's enthusiasm. He wrote her a long, cautionary letter. There was a difference in religion, he warned, as well as in customs. Could she live in a country where women were veiled, but men could have four wives?

"*Would I have to wear a veil?*" she asked Jamal.

"No, of course not, at least not most of the time." He kissed the tip of her nose.

Life had never been so wonderful for Katherine. She was twenty years old and in love. She knew exactly what she was going to do with her life. Nothing could mar her happiness.

But something did and that was Rashid.

FOR DAYS that long-ago spring Jamal talked of nothing but his older brother's impending visit. Rashid planned to attend the Princeton reunion in June and Jamal was beside himself with excitement.

"I can't wait to have him meet you," he told Kathy.

"Does he know we're engaged?"

He nodded. "That's probably why he's coming."

"I wish you hadn't told him."

"Not tell Rashid? You don't understand, Kathy. Rashid is more than my older brother. He helped raise me—I've always depended on him. And he's going to be crazy about you."

Despite his reassuring words, Katherine felt a small nudge of fear. She knew it was justified the minute she saw Rashid Ben Hasir at the Friday night cocktail party marking the beginning of the reunion.

He was taller than Jamal and of a broader build. His eyes had a coldly speculative look that made him appear older than twenty-nine. She found his mouth cruel-looking, but strangely sensuous as well.

The three of them went to a rugby game the next day and that night Rashid took Katherine and Jamal into New York for dinner at 21.

She didn't see Jamal on Sunday. The campus was still a buzz of activity but she stayed in the dorm waiting for his call.

He didn't call on Monday or Tuesday, but on Wednesday Rashid phoned to invite her to dinner.

"The Harbor House at eight?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you, that will be fine."

"Take a taxi. I'll wait for you at the entrance."

I'll wait for you at the entrance? Please let Jamal be there, she prayed.

But he wasn't.

"Will he be coming later?" she asked Rashid, who took her arm and followed the maître d' to a secluded table.

When she was seated he said, "Jamal isn't coming, Katherine."

"I see." She didn't, of course. Where was Jamal?

"Would you like a drink?"

"A glass of white wine, please."

With great ease he carried the conversation while Katherine sipped her wine. When their dinner came she

nibbled at her salmon while he ate his shishkabob.

Finally, halfway through the meal, he said, "I know you're wondering why I wanted to talk to you, Katherine."

She looked at him across the table.

"It's about you and Jamal, of course. You're both very young. You're what? Nineteen?"

"I'm twenty."

"Much too young to consider a step like marriage, especially if you want to finish your education."

"I could go to school in Morocco."

"Perhaps. But once you and Jamal start having children that would be out of the question." He shook his head. "It would be better if you waited two or three years."

"How... does Jamal feel about that?"

"He's seen the logic of it. If you're still in love two or three years from now we can talk about this again."

"We can talk about this again!" Her whole body tensed in anger. "This is between Jamal and me."

The dark eyes narrowed. "I'm Jamal's guardian until he's twenty-five. He'll do as I tell him. Marriage now is out of the question."

"Especially to an American?"

"That's right. Especially one who is a Christian."

"Where is Jamal?"

"I put him on a plane for Casa-blanca this morning."

Katherine stared at him.

"I'm sorry," Rashid went on. "We thought it best."

"You thought it best, so you've turned our lives around." She slapped her napkin down and pushed her chair back.

"Please don't leave," Rashid said. "I have something else to say to you."

"I don't want to hear anything you have to say." Katherine tried to rise but he held her wrist. "Wait until I've finished," he warned. "Then I'll put you in a cab."

There was nothing Katherine could do if she didn't want to make a scene.

"That's better," Rashid said. "I've made inquiries about you. It seems that you're an exceptionally good student. When you graduate next year you plan to go on and get a master's degree. That's admirable. In a few months you'll forget about Jamal and get on with your life. However, to compensate for any pain that his leaving has caused, and to help a bit with your education, I'd like you to take this."

He handed her a check. When she didn't take it he said, "It's for twenty thousand dollars, Katherine."

"Twenty thousand dollars!" Almost without thinking she reached for the check and looked at it. Then she felt the sickness of rage rising in her throat. "How dare you?" she whispered.

"Oh come now. There's no need to be dramatic." His smile was condescending. "Take the money and enjoy it."

"Enjoy it?" She shoved her chair back, not even aware that her voice had risen or that she was crying and people were staring. "You take your money," she shouted, "and stick it... on your shishkabob!" Then she ripped the check in two, flung it on the table and ran out of the restaurant.

*

"IT'S A MIRACLE," Jamal said when he called her. "I can't believe you're here. Are you free for dinner tonight?"

"Sorry, I have plans." Her words were cool.

"Then tomorrow. Please, Kathy. Eight o'clock?"

"Yes, all right," she said. "Eight is fine."

The next night she chose a sea-green silk dress that did nice things for her figure. She twisted her long blond hair into a chignon and for jewelry she wore a gold sand dollar necklace with matching earrings.

She tensed when the buzzer rang, then, drawing a deep breath to steady herself, she opened the door.

The boy had become a devastatingly handsome man.

"Hello, Jamal," she said. "How nice to see you."

He smiled an apologetic smile and said, "Hello, Kathy."

"Come in."

"Thank you." He glanced around. "This is nice."

"I've only been here a few months. It needs a bit of fixing up. Would you like a drink?"

"Perrier if you have it."

"Yes, of course." She went to prepare his drink, and a gin and tonic for herself, then sat across from him on the sofa.

"Here's to old acquaintance, Kathy."

"To old acquaintance."

"Have you ever forgiven me for leaving?"

"I'm not sure."

"Rashid made me leave. There wasn't anything I could do." His dark

eyes looked beseechingly into hers. "Forgive me, Kathy. Give me a chance to make it up to you."

Katherine hesitated, then said, "I suppose there's no reason why we can't be friends."

"Friends? I want us to be more than friends, Kathy. I want it to be like it was seven years ago."

"Jamal—"

"No, don't say anything now. But I want you to know that nothing has changed. You were my first love, Kathy. I was a fool to leave you." His lips brushed hers. "Now how about dinner? Have you been to the Rif?"

Katherine shook her head.

"Have you gotten accustomed to Moroccan food?"

"Yes, I love it."

"Good. The Rif has some of the best food in Rabat."

THE NEXT MORNING he sent her two dozen yellow roses.

She saw him three times that week before he had to return to Tangier on business. A week later he came back and they saw each other every night. He was charming and dear. She liked being with him and tried not to admit to herself that something was missing.

It's natural, she thought. Seven years have passed. We've changed. We're different people.

In some ways he hadn't changed; he was still the boy who sent flowers and small gifts—a pair of silver earrings, embroidered cocktail napkins, a slave bracelet that he insisted on fastening around her ankle.

"There now," he said as he kissed her instep, "you're my slave." He pretended to twirl a moustache. "A slave to my wild desire." He nipped her an-

kle, then, pushing her back against the sofa began to smother her with kisses. But suddenly her closeness—the feel of her body, the scent of her—was too much.

His arms tightened as his mouth sought hers. "Kathy," he whispered, his body taut with longing.

"Jamal, don't..."

"Darling, please. Please." A hand closed on her breast. "Kathy, I love you. I want you. I—"

"No!" she said and sat up.

For a long time they didn't speak. Then he took her hand. "I don't blame you for the way you feel," he said. "It's my fault because I left you." He brought her hand to his lips. "But I am going to make you believe in me again, Kathy—and forget that I let Rashid separate us."

A week later Jamal said, "Rashid's going to be in Rabat this weekend. He's asked us to have dinner with him Saturday."

"Saturday? I'm afraid I can't, Jamal. There's an embassy cocktail party I have to go to."

"Then we'll eat later." He turned her around and, putting a finger under her chin, lifted her face. "I'd like the two of you to be friends."

They had dinner at a small but quite elegant French restaurant. Rashid had little to say, but Jamal tried to keep the conversation going.

"I have a great idea," he said. "Next weekend is your Easter week, isn't it, Kathy?"

She nodded. "I have four days off."

"Any plans?"

"No."

"What about you, Rashid?"

"None that I remember."

"Then why don't the three of us fly to Marrakesh?"

Katherine's eyes widened. She glanced at Rashid and when she saw his frown, felt a quirk of wry amusement. He looked like he could have throttled Jamal.

"Marrakesh? I'd love to go," she said to Jamal.

"Great! Isn't that great, Rashid? We can fly over on the company plane Thursday afternoon. I'll phone Grandfather tomorrow and tell him we're coming." He reached out and took her hand. "There are so many places I want to show you, Kathy."

"And so many things I want to see," she said, feeling a ping of satisfaction when her gaze slid from Jamal's to Rashid's and she saw a thin white line of anger around his mouth. "Thank you for asking, darling," she said to Jamal.

For years the name Marrakesh had stirred excitement in Katherine. Marrakesh, red city of the Arabian Nights, jewel of the Islamic world, city of Casbahs and souks, of veiled women with shadowed eyes and henna'd hands.

Although Katherine had insisted she would be quite happy at a hotel, Jamal said there was more than enough room at his grandfather's. Besides, he would be offended if Jamal and Rashid didn't bring their guest to his home.

Katherine was curious about this man who had taken a French wife and refused to divorce her or take another wife after she left him and returned to Paris.

The chauffeur, who had picked them up at the airport, drove slowly up the long curved driveway bordered by stately royal palms. The house, a large

two-story pink palace, was surrounded on three sides by terraced gardens, brilliant flowers and sparkling fountains. As they drew nearer Katherine could see the beautiful tiled Moorish arches.

"Does your grandfather live here alone?" she asked.

"Just he and the servants," Jamal said. "Of course Rashid and I live here whenever we're in Marrakesh. The family still has olive and orange groves nearby. Morocco has some of the best oranges in the world. Our family has made its living off them for generations."

The inside of the house was beautiful and typically Arabian. The floors and walls were tiled in blue-and-gold mosaic.

Suddenly a tall, fierce-looking man hurried toward them. Hair startling white against his bronzed face, he wore a tan-colored djellaba. Rashid went to embrace him, then kissed both his cheeks. Jamal did likewise before leading him to Katherine.

"Grandfather, we've brought a guest from the United States, Miss Katherine Bishop. Katherine, this is my grandfather, Youssef Fallah Hasir."

"Miss Bishop." He took her hand. "*Marhabán*, welcome. Our house is your house. I hope it pleases you. Have you been to Marrakesh before?"

"No, sir, but it's a city I've always wanted to see."

"Then my grandsons will show you around. Rashid, I know Miss Bishop would enjoy the Bahia Palace. The gardens are extraordinary. The scent of jasmine permeates the air this time of year. You really must insist that Rashid take you there tomorrow."

"I imagine Rashid has other plans," Jamal put in, an odd expression on his face. He placed his arm around Katherine's waist and, smiling down at her, said, "But I'll certainly take her, Grandfather. Thank you for the suggestion."

The old man's brows drew together in a frown. He glanced from Rashid to Katherine, his dark eyes, so like Rashid's, widening in barely disguised surprise. Then in a smooth voice he said, "Well, my dear, just as long as you see them. And the souks, of course. Now I suppose you'd like to freshen up and have your things unpacked. We dine at eight." He clapped his hands and when a servant appeared, said, "Show *mademoiselle* to her room, please."

The room the servant led her to was huge, and in the afternoon sun, aglow in golden shades of apricot. The head of the bed, covered by a foamy apricot-colored spread, was draped in gold chiffon. There was a long dresser with a bouquet of yellow roses, a gold velvet chaise, a small desk and chair.

The adjoining bathroom, all white and gold, had a sunken tub, and there were stacks of thick towels, imported soaps and bath oils.

Katherine went out onto the balcony off the bedroom to look at the stretch of terraced gardens below. Beyond the city lay the Atlas Mountains and she wondered what it was like beyond them, out toward the Sahara.

She was glad she'd made this trip with Jamal and Rashid, even though Rashid was clearly not happy about it. The grandfather seemed nice, and she hoped to get to know him better. But she'd bet every dirham she had that he could be a holy terror when he was angry.

AND Youssef Fallah Hasir was angry.

"I thought she belonged to you," he told Rashid after he had sent Jamal out of the room on an errand. "By God, if she doesn't she should. A fine-looking woman. Good lines, splendid legs, wonderful bone structure. And yellow eyes. By God, Rashid, it's years since I've seen a woman with yellow eyes. Only knew one—a Berber girl from a village near Azrou. Met her when I was just a teenager and I've never forgotten her." The trace of a smile crossed his lips. "But I don't suppose a man ever forgets the first girl he makes love to." He looked at Rashid and swallowed hard. "That was over fifty years ago. I thought I'd forgotten her until today when I saw your Miss Bishop."

"She's Jamal's friend, Grandfather."

"Where'd he meet her?"

"At Princeton."

"Seven damn years ago?"

Rashid nodded. "By the time I got there she and Jamal were engaged. It was ridiculous, because he was only twenty-one, so I sent him home."

"I'm surprised she let him go without a fight."

"I didn't give her a chance to fight."

"What's she doing here in Morocco?"

"She works for the United States Embassy."

"Jamal trying to take up where he left off?"

"Yes."

"You still don't approve?"

"No, I don't. She's a foreigner, a Christian. Marriage would be a mistake—for her and for Jamal." Rashid hesitated. "Forgive me, sir, but it would be the kind of mistake you made when you married Monique St. Onge."

Youssef's eyes darkened with rage. "Monique Fallah Hasir," he said. "Your grandmother. My wife. She gave me two fine sons and she loved me. We had eighteen years together and I'll never regret them." Youssef stood up and shook a finger in Rashid's face. "At least I haven't been afraid to love," he roared. "What in Allah's name is the matter with you? Can't you see what a fine-looking woman that Bishop girl is? Any fool can see that Jamal isn't man enough for her. But you are."

"The woman can't stand me," Rashid said. "Nor I her."

"Camel dung! Make love to her and then see how you feel about each other."

With a grin Rashid said, "Even if I did what you suggest, what about Jamal? He's in love with her."

"Damn!" Youssef paced the room. "He's a fine boy, but he's weak, Rashid, and we both know it. He's no match for Miss Bishop. I still wish you'd go after her. A woman with yellow eyes is a rare creature."

"Her eyes are golden," Rashid said, almost to himself. Then before his grandfather could say anything else, he excused himself and hurried to his room.

FOR DINNER that night Katherine wore an ivory and gold brocade caftan. Her wheat-colored hair, pulled back from her face by a thin gold band, hung down her back. Her only jewelry was a pair of gold loop earrings.

"I've made a shaker of martinis," Youssef said as he led her into a beautifully appointed salon. "I happen to know that Rashid, for all his sterling qualities, has a weakness for them. I've

made enough for the two of you. Jamal and I will settle for Perrier."

Katherine smiled as she took the drink. When she took a sip she said, "This is marvelous, Mr. Hasir."

"Holland gin, Miss Bishop. I'll give you a case when you leave."

"No, no please. I can't accept such a gift."

"Of course you can and you will. Now come and sit beside me. I want to know where you come from in the United States and what you think of Morocco."

It was a pleasant evening. Youssef was a wonderful host and the food was excellent. After dinner, they went out to the patio.

"Smell the jasmine," Youssef said, taking Katherine's arm. "Let me show you the view from over here," he offered, and led her away from the others to where they could see the lights of the city.

"How long will you be here?" he asked her. "I know you're working for the embassy in Rabat, but I don't know how long these assignments are."

"They can last from two years to five or six."

"Will you be content to stay that long?"

"Yes, I'm sure I will."

"You don't miss your parents?"

"I miss them very much, but we write often. I'll see them for a month next year when I go home for leave."

His keen dark eyes searched her face. Then abruptly he asked, "Are you going to marry Jamal?"

For a moment Katherine was too startled to speak. Then she said, "I don't know. Maybe."

"That's what I was afraid of."

"Because I'm an American?"

"No, damn it, because he's the wrong grandson."

Katherine stared at him. "What... what do you mean?"

"You know damn well what I mean. Rashid's the man for you, not Jamal. If you married Rashid you'd have a man who could handle you."

Katherine's eyes narrowed. "Handle me? *Bully* me, you mean. I'd never let a man do that."

His smile was sly. "I knew you'd say that. I knew those yellow tiger eyes of yours would narrow and spit fire. Lord, girl, but you remind me..." He shook his head, then said, "You've got spirit, and I admire that in a woman. I know you think I'm an interfering old man, but I love both of my grandsons and I want what's best for them. I just happen to think you'd be the best thing that ever happened to Rashid. But I suppose it's none of my business. Now let's get back to the others."

KATHERINE SAW Jamal often in the days following her return from Marakesh. Although his office was in Tangier, he came to Rabat for business at least once a week and every weekend. He was attentive and loving, but every time he began to approach the subject of marriage she managed to sidestep it. But at last, as she had known it would, the time came when the subject could no longer be avoided.

They had spent the evening dining and dancing and when they returned to her apartment Jamal asked if he could come in.

"Only for a minute," Katherine said. "I have a heavy day tomorrow."

"What I have to say will only take a minute," he said, but before she could snap a light on he pulled her into his

arms. "I love you," he whispered. With a soft groan of need his mouth found hers as his arms tightened around her. "I can't endure this," he murmured. "Being with you, touching you and still not having you."

"Jamal—"

"Don't keep punishing me for what I did seven years ago. I want you to be my wife. Oh Kathy, I love you so."

She wanted to weep because he was so dear and because she had loved him once. "I don't know what to say—I'm not sure I'm ready for marriage."

"Is there anyone else?"

"No, of course not."

"Then I have a chance. That's all I ask, Kathy." He kissed her eyelids, her nose, the corners of her mouth. "My sweet darling," he murmured. "Tell me you love me, Kathy."

"Jamal..." Perhaps it was because of what had once been between them. Perhaps it was because of his trembling need that she whispered, "I love you, Jamal."

"Oh, darling." He kissed her again. "You'll marry me?" Before she could answer he covered her mouth with his.

When he released her he said, "Let's make it soon; I'll go crazy if I have to wait much longer. Next week? Next month? Where would you like to be married? How about Marrakesh? Grandfather would love that."

Katherine stepped out of his arms. Her head spun; she wasn't even sure what had happened. "Why don't we... wait a while before we... tell anybody."

Jamal laughed and reached for her again. "But I want to tell everybody. I want to tell the whole world. Oh God, Kathy, I'm so happy."

She tried to smile, tried to tell herself that she was as happy as he was. But after he left she sat in the dark for a long time, wondering what she was going to do.

"I HAVE A present for you, Kathy," Jamal said two nights later as he handed her a gift-wrapped package. Then he smiled at Rashid. "It's something special, big brother. I wanted you to be here."

Aware of Rashid watching her, Katherine slipped the satin ribbon off. "I can't imagine what it is," she murmured, wishing Jamal hadn't done this in front of his brother. She opened the box and, within layers of white tissue, saw a beautiful wide gold belt, obviously very expensive. As she lifted it out, she heard Rashid gasp.

"It's lovely!" she said.

"But you don't know what it is, do you?" said Jamal.

"It's a belt." Katherine looked at him, puzzled.

"A very special belt, Kathy." Jamal covered her hand with his. "It's a marriage belt."

"It's our custom," Rashid said coldly. "When a couple becomes engaged the man gives the woman a gold marriage belt, the most expensive he can afford. It's a form of security," he went on in the same cold voice, "like money in the bank. Later on, if they need to, the couple can always sell it."

"We'll never sell this one." Jamal squeezed her hand.

She looked from brother to brother, feeling trapped. Their engagement was official now and she wasn't even sure she'd said yes.

"When's the wedding?" Rashid asked.

"Next month—if that's all right with Katherine. How do you think Grandfather will feel about having the wedding in Marrakesh? I think he'd be pleased, don't you?"

"Probably." Rashid looked at Katherine. "What about you? Is that where you'd like to be married?"

"I..." She swallowed nervously. "Yes, of course, if that's what Jamal wants."

"So you're already beginning to practice our ways." There was only the slightest hint of irony in Rashid's voice. "The dutiful fiancée, acceding to her beloved's wishes. I find that quite touching."

Katherine lifted her chin. "Most women want to please the men they love," she said, and saw his eyes darken with anger.

THE FOLLOWING evening, as she dressed to go out with him, Jamal phoned.

"Bad luck, Kathy," he said. "I've got to fly to Tangier tonight."

"I'm sorry, Jamal. When will you be back?"

"I'm not sure. I may have to go to Paris. It's company business, sweetheart. Rashid would go but he's tied up with a government meeting next week."

"I see."

"And Rashid says I may have to go on to Lyon from Paris."

Rashid. Her hand tightened on the phone.

"I'll be away at least a week, maybe two. I'm sorry, Kathy, there just isn't anything I can do about it."

"I understand." Oh yes, she thought. I understand.

"All right, Kathy. Look, I've got to go. Rashid's driving me to the airport. I'll call in a few days."

"All right, darling. Have a safe trip."

When she put the phone down she stood for a moment, her face twisted in anger. Rashid had done it again! He'd keep Jamal away as long as he could, long enough to see how he could ruin their marriage plans. Damn him!

JAMAL PHONED her from Paris, then from Lyon to say he had to fly to Geneva. "It can't be helped, Kathy. We do a tremendous export business in olives this time of year. There's trouble with shipments. It looks like we'll have to postpone the wedding for a few weeks. Will it affect your job?"

"I don't think so."

"You have told them you're leaving?"

"No."

Her job was the only thing they argued about. Katherine wanted to stay on at the embassy, but Jamal wanted her to quit.

"All right, but please remember how I feel about your working after we're married."

"I'll remember."

"I've got to run, darling. I'm sure I'll be back by the middle of next week."

But he wasn't. He phoned from Geneva to say that Rashid had just called to tell him to get back to Lyon.

When she put the phone down she was angry, angry at Jamal for being too blind to see what Rashid was up to, and at Rashid for doing the same thing he'd done seven years ago. But mixed

with her anger was a feeling of relief. The wedding would have to be delayed.

Katherine had never felt so uncertain, so confused. Everything had happened too fast. She should never have accepted the marriage belt that sealed the engagement. And she wouldn't have if Rashid hadn't been sitting across the table from her, his eyes taunting her. She'd accepted the belt to prove he could no longer tell her or Jamal how to run their lives.

She knew that Rashid had deliberately sent Jamal away and so she was surprised at the end of that week when he called to tell her Jamal had made plans to return to Morocco. "He'll be flying directly to Marrakesh," Rashid said. "He wants you to meet him there."

Katherine frowned. "Why didn't he call me himself?"

"He didn't have time. Said he was running for the plane. Look, I told him I'm flying to Marrakesh in the morning and he asked me to see if you'd fly with me. Can you take a few days off? The weekend's coming up. Jamal has earned a vacation. It would do you both good to take it easy for a few days."

Katherine stared at the telephone in disbelief. Was Rashid actually trying to be nice to her?

"I'm not sure," she said slowly. "But yes, I suppose so. What time are you leaving?"

"About nine. I'll come by for you at eight."

RASHID INVITED Katherine to sit next to him in the cockpit. She said no, that she preferred not to see things that clearly.

"Afraid of flying?"

"A bit."

"It's quite safe." He led her to a window seat.

She sat back, trying to dispel a feeling of foreboding as she fastened her seat belt. She didn't like being alone with Rashid but she consoled herself by remembering that Jamal would be in Marrakesh.

The steady drone of the plane soothed her as she leafed through a magazine. Finally she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep. When she woke she was surprised to see it was almost noon. They should be arriving any minute. She glanced out the window and saw the close rise of mountains. She hadn't remembered crossing them on the other trip to Marrakesh.

Fifteen minutes went by. With growing impatience Katherine drummed her fingernails against the magazine. All she could see was mountains and desert. She had just started up out of her seat to ask Rashid how much longer it would be when the "Fasten Seat Belt" sign flashed on. Katherine settled back into her seat, sighing with relief. But when she looked out, there was no sign of the city.

The plane flew lower, then lower still. My God, Katherine thought, what's happening? Is something wrong with the plane? Were they going to crash?

She saw the runway then, a narrow strip only wide enough to handle a plane this size. The wheels touched down and the plane glided along, slowed and stopped.

Ahead of her she saw a hangar. To the side of the runway, a car.

Rashid swiveled to face her. "We're here," he said.

"Here? Where?" Katherine's voice rose.

"The other side of the Atlas Mountains, Katherine."

"But why did you land? Jamal is waiting in Marrakesh."

Rashid shook his head. "Jamal is in Lyon. He'll be there until I tell him to come home."

"What are you talking about?" Her eyes were wide as a sudden and terrible fear gripped her. Oh God! She should have known better than to come with Rashid. He hated her. He'd do anything to keep her from marrying Jamal.

"What are you going to do to me?" she whispered.

"Do to you?" He towered over her, his cruelly sensuous mouth curved into a smile. "Nothing. You're going to be my guest for a while, that's all."

"Your guest?" She stared at him. "You can't do this."

"Can't I? In a few days Wade Contney will receive a telegram, sent from Marrakesh, telling him that you and Jamal have gone to Agadir for a week or two. Jamal will receive one that says you've been sent to another embassy for a while and that you'll be in touch."

"You can't do this. This is... kidnapping! It's—"

"Kidnapping? Don't be silly—you're practically a member of the family. I've brought you here so we can talk, that's all."

"My God, Rashid, you could have talked to me in Rabat."

"But you wouldn't have listened to me there. Here you'll have to."

Her yellow eyes narrowed to slits. "Can you even imagine how much I hate you?" she said in a low voice.

For a moment it seemed that he flinched. Then he shoved her ahead of him to the door of the plane.

THE HEAT hit Katherine like a physical blow and the sun blinded her. When she shaded her eyes she saw two men get out of a black Mercedes. Dressed in djellabas, they looked strong and capable.

"*Marhabán*," one of the men said, "Welcome. It is cool in the car. Fakhout and I will attend to the plane."

Rashid nodded. He took Katherine's arm and led her to the car. "Get in the back," he ordered.

"You'll never get away with this, Rashid. I'm an employee of the United States Embassy. There's going to be hell to pay when they discover I'm missing."

"I've handled that."

"What about Jamal? What do you think he'll do when he discovers what you've done? He'll never forgive you."

His hand tightened. "Get in," he said again.

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded.

"I have a home near the edge of the Sahara. You'll find it's quite comfortable, but if there's anything special you desire you have only to ask."

"I'm asking now. Fly me out of here and back to Rabat."

"After we've had a chance to talk."

"Rashid, please..." She took a deep breath. "I know you don't like me. Maybe it's because I'm an American. Maybe you think I'll try to change Jamal. But I won't. I'm quite willing to live in his country, to—"

"To live like a Moroccan woman?" Rashid cut in.

"No, of course not. But Jamal wouldn't ask me to."

"Are you so sure, Katherine?" He turned away, and they sat in silence until the two men came back to the car.

With the man called Saoud at the wheel they drove past small villages where red houses stood baking in the sun. Katherine tried to memorize the few signs she saw. Rashid might think he was going to keep her here, but sooner or later she'd get away. When she did she had to know where to go.

"Are we near a town?" she asked casually.

He nodded. "Erfoud. It's the gateway to the Sahara."

Erfoud. She tucked the name away in her memory.

In a little while they turned off the main road onto an even narrower private road. Now, on either side, there was nothing but miles and miles of sand.

They'd been on this road almost thirty-five minutes when at last she saw the oasis and finally, rimmed with tall palms, the house that was almost the same pink-red color as the sand.

Never in her life had she been in a situation where she felt so helpless. There was no one to whom she could appeal for help. The men in the front seat worked for Rashid. Even if she spoke their language they wouldn't have listened to her pleas. And the oasis was isolated in a sea of sand. There was nothing for miles around.

Stay calm, she told herself. Look around, try to find something that might help you.

When the car stopped, Rashid got out and offered her his hand. Ignoring

it, Katherine got out by herself. She glanced around her. To her right was an open two-car garage. Inside there was a jeep. Back beyond that, she saw a corral and what looked like a stable.

"Come along," Rashid said. He handed her suitcase to one of the woman servants.

"Fatima will show you to your room," he told Katherine. "She's Berber, as are all these people. She doesn't speak French or English and almost no Arabic. When you're ready she'll escort you to the dining room."

Whatever Rashid used this hide-away for, he had obviously spared no expense, Katherine thought. When Fatima bowed and opened a high carved door, it was to one of the most beautiful bedrooms Katherine had ever seen.

Everything in it was gold and ivory. The only touch of color was a turquoise velvet chaise and turquoise decorator pillows on the ivory brocade spread covering the round bed. If this was a prison, she thought with wonder, then it must be the most beautiful prison in the world.

She ran her hand across the dresser, touched the petals of the white roses in the vase at one end, then moved to the dressing table. On it was a matching silver mirror, comb and brush set monogrammed with the initial *K*. She stared at it. *K* for Katherine? Had this room, this *prison*, been designed for her?

With trembling fingers she touched unopened bottles of French perfume and a completely outfitted makeup case.

This isn't real, Katherine thought. Any moment now I'm going to wake up in my own room back in Buckport.

Then Fatima crossed the room, opened a door and motioned Katherine inside to a bathroom that was all turquoise and gold tile.

A built-in bench curved all around one side. There was a double sink with indirect lighting, a built-in hairdryer, shelves stacked with thick towels and a sunken turquoise bathtub. On a wicker stand beside the tub were various bath oils and French soaps.

Fatima reached down and turned the golden fish-shaped faucets. Then she opened one of the bottles of bath oil and splashed it into the water.

"All right," Katherine said in a shaky voice. "Maybe a bath will make me feel better."

When Fatima knocked fifteen minutes later she came in with a white satin robe. After Katherine had dried herself and slipped into the robe, she followed Fatima back into the bedroom. When she didn't see her suitcase she said, "Where are my clothes?"

Fatima looked puzzled, then a light dawned and she crossed the room to open the sliding doors of a closet filled with djellabas and caftans. Then, taking Katherine's hand, she led her to the dresser and opened the drawers. Inside, carefully folded, was an array of the sheerest and surely the most expensive underwear Katherine had ever seen—and nightgowns that looked as though they had been spun from fairy cloth.

Katherine stared at Fatima. The woman nodded, pointed to the clothes and then to Katherine. In a smaller wardrobe, she saw racks and racks of jeweled Moroccan slippers.

"Oh for heaven's sweet sake!" she said when Fatima handed her a pair. She went behind the screen to dress.

The bra she had chosen fit her perfectly, as did the panties and the caftan. Katherine felt a chill of fear.

After she'd brushed her hair and applied a touch of makeup she turned to follow Fatima down the long corridor to the dining room where Rashid waited.

He had changed to a white djellaba.

"I've had a table set up in the alcove where it's cooler," he said. "It takes a while to adjust to the heat."

Katherine didn't answer.

"Would you care for something to drink? Fresh orange juice perhaps?"

She nodded.

"Come, sit down."

She did as he asked. Then, accepting the drink from a servant she took a sip and said, "Rashid, please, let's stop this nonsense and talk."

"After we have finished our drinks."

Katherine stared at him helplessly.

The servants brought a lunch of fresh green salad and broiled chicken. It looked appetizing but Katherine only picked at her food and Rashid finally said, "You don't like the chicken? Would you prefer something else?"

"No! What I'd prefer is for you to stop acting so damn civilized. If you're a barbarian then act like one, damn it. That would be easier to understand."

"So you think I'm a barbarian?"

"Aren't you? You've kidnapped me, brought me here..."

He sighed. "I see we're not to eat in peace." He clapped his hands and a servant took away the plates. Then he turned to Katherine. "Very well, we'll talk if that's what you want."

"You said you brought me here to talk about Jamal and me," she said. "But this wasn't a spur-of-the-moment

decision, Rashid. You've planned this very carefully."

"Very carefully."

"The clothes." Katherine fingered the silk material of the caftan. "This, the other things, the shoes. Who do they belong to? Do you have a mistress?"

He shook his head. "Not yet."

A frantic pulse beat in her throat. She tried to look away but she was snared by his eyes.

"You know that everything is for you, Katherine."

"But why? Why?"

"I think you know that too, Katherine. Katherine Bishop of Buckport, Maine, whose father has a drugstore, whose mother taught kindergarten at the Abraham Lincoln Elementary School before she married. That's where you went to school. There and Buckport High where you were valedictorian and graduated with honors high enough to get a partial scholarship to Princeton."

"How did you . . . ?" Her eyes were wide.

"Find out these things? It's easy when one has enough money and the interest to dig a bit."

He leaned back, watching her as he went on. "You did well at Princeton and rarely dated—until you met Jamal."

"After he left you quit school for a year, to work as a secretary for an insurance company during the day and as a waitress at night, to earn enough money for your final year at school."

He took a deep breath. "You were desperate for money when you flung that check in my face, weren't you?"

Katherine nodded.

"Yet you did it without hesitation. I find that interesting."

"What has any of that to do with why I'm here?"

"It tells me the type of woman you are and that I was wrong several years ago when I thought you were a scheming little minx who wanted a bit of fun with a wealthy foreigner. Even so, I knew you weren't right for Jamal."

"My grandfather, who is half in love with you himself, agrees that marriage between you and Jamal would be disastrous. He has, however, suggested that you and I are suited."

Katherine's eyes narrowed in anger, but before she could speak Rashid said, "When I told him that you couldn't stand the sight of me he said I should make love to you and then see how you felt."

Katherine's face was frozen in shock.

"I should like very much to make love to you, Katherine. You see, I agree with my grandfather that I'd be better for you than Jamal. I love my brother but I know that he isn't man enough for a woman like you."

"Perhaps you don't know Jamal as well as you think," she said. "Perhaps he's more of a man than you think."

The color drained from Rashid's face. Before she could draw back, he grabbed her wrist. "Have you slept with my brother?"

For a moment she was tempted to lie. But when he rasped again, "Have you?" she shook her head. Then, seeing the triumph in his eyes, she added, "Not yet."

"Then you *will* not. You *will* not!" He let go of her wrist and, trying to calm himself, began to peel an orange.

When he finished he put it on a clean plate before her.

"Marriage between an Arab and a foreigner is difficult, Katherine. I've seen this in my own family. My grandmother found it impossible to adjust to life in Morocco."

He hesitated, then said, "Have you ever looked around you in a restaurant here in Morocco? Haven't you noticed that except for one or two foreigners like yourself, there are only men? Women simply don't go out socially with their husbands. If a woman must go out during the day, she's veiled so that no other man may look upon her face or her form. She plays a passive role in society. In her own home, when her husband entertains, she isn't present. She waits quietly in another room until the guests leave."

"Jamal wouldn't expect me to live like that."

"Jamal is a Moroccan, Katherine, as I am. It's exactly what he'd expect from his wife." He shook his head. "I don't think you could live that way. However, I've brought you here to find out."

"What are you talking about?"

"For two weeks, we're going to pretend that you're a Moroccan wife—the wife of a fairly rich man. I've bought you clothes because it pleases me to see you dressed well. When we go out you'll be robed and veiled. When I entertain here, you won't be present. However, should I wish you to make an appearance you will not speak unless you are spoken to and you will not express an opinion."

Katherine stared at him. "You can't do this!"

"Oh, but I can. Don't look so alarmed. I've told you—it will only be

for two weeks. In that time I hope to convince you of two things." He captured one of her hands. "First, that marriage to Jamal is quite impossible. And second, that you should become my mistress."

"Your mistress!" She pulled her hand away. "You're insane," she said.

"No, Katherine, but I am obsessed. I've been obsessed from the moment I saw you seven years ago. I thought you were the loveliest woman I'd ever seen. You were like a flower in bud. You weren't even aware of what a beauty you were soon to be. But I knew what a glory you'd be."

He studied her face. Then he broke the orange into sections and held one to her lips. When she opened her mouth to take it, he touched the inside of her lips with his index finger. It was an intimate gesture and she shivered.

"I knew that you were innocent," he went on. "It was obvious in the way you moved, your shyness. I was captivated. I wanted to take you away with me, to hide you from the world. I wanted to teach you to love. I wanted to do everything to you that a man has ever done to a woman."

Katherine's hands tightened on the arm of the chair. She felt unable to breathe. She tried to look away from him and couldn't, mesmerized by the sound of his voice, the intensity in his dark eyes.

"Let me go," she whispered.

"In two weeks," he said. "If I haven't convinced you to give Jamal up, if in that time you haven't agreed to become my mistress, I'll take you back."

"I can ruin you."

"That's the chance I took when I brought you here."

The heat crushed down upon her, suffocating her. She couldn't bear it. Couldn't...

"What is it?" Rashid's voice seemed far away.

"I'm so... I—I can't breathe..."

The room tilted and spun. She heard Rashid scrape back his chair, felt herself being lifted in his arms.

"Fatima!" he shouted. "Fatima!"

An excited voice. The scurry of slippered feet. The opening of a door. Then she was laid gently down and felt a cold cloth against her forehead.

"Katherine?" It was Rashid's voice. "Are you all right?"

Her eyelids fluttered open. "So warm," she said.

"It's my fault," he said. "I've frightened you."

"Let me go. Oh please, Rashid, let me go."

Dark desert eyes gazed down into hers. Slowly he shook his head. "I can't," he said. "I can't."

*

THE VEIL TICKLED Katherine's nose. She gave small puffs of breath, trying to blow it away from her face.

She'd never felt so wrapped up, from the top of her head to her ankles. All that was visible were her golden eyes.

She'd been here now for three days. This morning Rashid had instructed Fatima to dress her for leaving the house.

"Now you look like a proper Moroccan woman," he said with a slight smile. "See that you behave like one." When Fatima left the room he said to Katherine, "It's a strange thing. Perhaps it's because I know what a lovely body is hidden under your robe and what a beautiful face lies behind the

veil, but you're even more desirable now. You excite me, Katherine. More than any woman I've ever known."

He moved so close that she could feel his breath on her face. "I want to rip your robe off and kiss every fragrant and lovely inch of you. I want..." His nostrils flared. "But I won't," he said, "because when we make love I want you to want me as much as I want you."

"Then you'll wait forever," she snapped.

"We'll see." He put a hand on her shoulder. "Now come, I want to show you my oasis."

His oasis. His land, his people, his camels, his horses.

The stables had been built under a group of tall palm trees. The animals whinnied when they caught sight of Rashid. He stopped at the first stall to rub the horse's nose. "This is Desert Witch," he said, unfastening the lower door. "Come and have a look at her foal. He's a week old today. Isn't he a beauty? I've named him Calafia."

The colt was black, with white stockings on his forelegs, sleek and muscled, eyes alert, ears perked.

"Aren't you beautiful!" Katherine said as she reached to scratch behind his ears.

"Do you ride?"

"I used to. But not since I've been in Morocco."

"Then we'll go riding in the desert some evening."

She glanced up at him, then turned back to the colt.

After a few minutes Rashid said, "You can see him again tomorrow." At the next stall he said, "This is Jezebel. She's almost ready to foal." He moved on, calling each horse by name:

Sultan, who had fathered Calafia; Intrepid, a handsome gray; and Dorado, a golden two-year-old.

Finally he led Katherine to a corral where the most beautiful horse she had ever seen galloped up to the fence.

"Hello, boy," Rashid said, rubbing the stallion's nose. "This is Corsair, my prize stallion. I think he's the most beautiful horse in Morocco."

"He's magnificent!" As much as Katherine hated to show enthusiasm for anything that belonged to Rashid, she couldn't help herself. Corsair was big and his lines were regal and perfect, but it was his color that made her gasp. He was a sleek bronze, with a coat so fine it looked as though he had been varnished.

"Oh, you're beautiful," Katherine said as she reached out to stroke the sleek nose.

"Be careful," Rashid cautioned as the stallion shied.

"It's this robe," Katherine said. "All this material flapping in his face. How can women stand to go around dressed like this?"

"They dress that way because they're modest," Rashid said. "Too modest to parade their faces and figures."

"Oh for—!" she glared at him. "That's chauvinistic garbage. You Arabs have kept these poor women under your thumbs for years. You keep them at home while you go out to ogle belly dancers."

"A belly dancer expects to be looked at. We respect our wives too much to expose them to anything like that."

"Wives is right. *Four* wives!"

"There are not too many Moroccans who have four." He grinned at her. "Wives are expensive."

"You're rich."

"Not rich, just fairly well off."

"You could have four wives."

"Yes, I suppose I could." He stepped closer to her. "But I don't want a wife. I only want a—"

"A mistress."

"I only want you." Eyes as black as night gazed into hers.

Katherine stared up at him. "Jamal is your brother," she said. "You've told me that you've been his brother, father and friend. I can't believe you want to destroy all that." She put her hand on his arm. "Let me go, Rashid, and we can forget this ever happened. I won't tell Jamal! I won't tell anybody. But you can't do this to me—you mustn't do it to him."

Rashid looked down into her eyes. "You're a witch," he said at last. "You bewitched Jamal and now me. I wish we'd never set eyes on you."

"Oh, so do I," she said, and turned away. "So do I."

THE NEXT MORNING, Katherine and Fatima walked around the oasis. There were two small shops, one that sold canned goods and staples, another with dry goods. A water seller, brass cups jingling around his neck, wandered through the small central square.

Rashid was away for the day. He had left a note saying that she should dine without him. But she was already determined to get as far away from him as she could. Her gaze roamed the oasis. There were no guards, and it appeared that there was only Fatima to watch her. She looked back toward the stables, then at the jeep in the open garage.

When some children came closer, a little boy tossed a ball to her. She

tossed it back, edging toward the jeep. When he threw it, she missed, letting it roll close enough to the jeep so that she could glance inside. The keys were in the ignition.

Grinning behind her veil, Katherine tossed the ball back. Tonight, she thought, I'm going to escape tonight while Rashid is gone. I can be in Erfoud by the time he returns.

The wind began to blow late that afternoon, and the sky darkened. Katherine's spirits rose when people ran for cover. It was perfect; by tonight everyone would be indoors. All she had to do was get to the jeep and follow the same road they'd taken to come here. In Erfoud she would go to the police for protection.

That night, Katherine waited until the house was quiet. Dressed in a dark blue djellaba, she bound her hair in a scarf. She had no suitcase so she emptied the makeup case and inside it put a few pieces of underwear, a nightgown, hairbrush, toothbrush, soap, a mirror and lipstick. She put an orange and few hard candies in her pocket.

She moved silently through the house, took a deep breath and stepped outside, surprised at how strong the wind was.

Quickly she ran across the yard to the jeep, slid into the driver's seat, and fumbled for the keys. Praise Allah, she thought, they were still there. She turned the key, struggled to find reverse, then backed the jeep out, threw it into first and headed for the road.

When Katherine turned the headlights on, she was surprised to see how dark it was. Sand drifted like snow and pinged against the windshield, making it almost impossible to see. She turned

on the windshield wipers, but they soon became clogged with sand.

For the first time since she had left Rashid's oasis Katherine felt a stab of fear. She was so totally alone in a world of swirling sand. She glanced at her watch and by the light on the dashboard saw that forty-five minutes had passed. She should have reached the main road ten minutes ago.

Slowing the jeep to a crawl, she felt the pull of the tires against the deepening sand. It slowed, grunted forward, then stopped. Katherine put it in reverse and heard the wheels spin. The jeep wouldn't budge. As frustrated as she was frightened now, she turned the motor off. There was nothing she could do but stay where she was until morning, when she would be able to see the road.

BUT THERE WAS no road—only a vast sea of sand stretching as far as Katherine could see. She had driven off the road and not even known it. She could be five miles—even ten—out in the desert.

Her hands tightened on the steering wheel as she looked around her, trying to stay calm.

The wind had stopped. The inside of the jeep was an inferno of heat. It was stuck in sand halfway up to the doors. Even if she had a shovel she doubted she could dig it out.

She had no choice; she had to return to Rashid's oasis. But which way was it? She looked around her, bewildered. Last night she'd driven for more than forty-five minutes. She knew now that for part of that time she'd been heading straight out into the desert.

Her hand tightened around the makeup case and finally, taking a deep

breath, she started away from the jeep, heading the way she thought she had come.

The desert was an endless solitude of heat and blinding light. Katherine bound up her hair, pulling the cloth low over her forehead to protect her face. Glancing at her wristwatch she saw that it was only nine o'clock. What would it be like at noon?

Nervously she unwrapped a hard candy and put it in her mouth. She'd wait to eat the orange. Two hours later she had to have it.

She peeled it carefully, conserving the skin to eat later. Just in case, she told herself.

By noon the desert was a hell of heat. Through the thin soles of her slippers, Katherine's feet burned. Sweat trickled down her body. When she began to feel dizzy she ate the orange skins. She kept fingering the hard candies, but told herself, wait. You'll need them later.

How long could people live in this heat? she wondered. Even people who were used to it? Camels could.

"Wish I were a camel, wish I were a camel," she chanted. "Wish I—" Suddenly she stopped. Ahead of her, shining in the sun, she saw a pool of water. With one joyous cry she ran toward it, mumbling in frustration because it was farther than she thought, crying aloud when it disappeared.

"Idiot!" she mumbled. "Everybody knows about mirages. Only a fool goes running toward one." She put a candy in her mouth.

She didn't think that anything would save her now but she had to go on. Rashid would be looking for her. He would never find her in this vast open space, but she knew he would try. It

seemed strange that he was the one she thought of now. Rashid had tricked her. She hated him, but she trusted his strength. If anybody could find her he could.

Katherine licked her dry lips and reached for another candy. But her pockets were empty.

"It's okay," she told herself. "Take it easy. Just keep going."

The sand tilted. Katherine stumbled and fell to her knees. "Please God," she mumbled. "Please Allah. Don't let me die out here. Give me the strength to go on. Let Rashid find me. Please!"

Eyes closed, she willed herself to her feet and went on, on while the sun seared down through her scalp, the sweat rolled off her body and her lips cracked and bled.

When she saw, through the glare of sun and sand, the pond of water she smiled through swollen lips. "Can't fool me this time." Then "Hey," she said, "there are even some trees around this mirage. How's that for seeing things?"

The scene swam before her eyes as she struggled forward until at last she saw that it wasn't a mirage after all. There really were trees. And a pool of water.

Water! Stumbling across the rocks that led to the shaded pool, she threw herself down and put her face in the water, almost hysterical with relief. She drank, she splashed it on her face, then drank again. Finally she rolled over in the shade of the trees, and went to sleep.

IT WAS STILL daylight when Katherine woke. When she sat up she still felt dizzy, but better. She stripped out of her djellaba and went to the pool.

The cool water felt wonderful against her skin. She drank her fill again, then lay down in it so that water covered her body.

She stayed like that for a long time and when she got out picked a handful of dates, wondering idly how long a person could live on dates and water. But it was a rhetorical wondering, not a fearful one.

Far out on the desert she saw a small cloud of dust. A whirlwind? she wondered. Another storm? Shading her eyes, she watched the cloud come closer. When she realized it was a horse and rider she began to wave.

"Here!" she cried, though she knew she was too far away to be heard.

At last she saw that the man was covered by a burnoose and that the horse was the color of bronze. She knew it was Corsair. Rashid had found her.

He raised his arm and urged the horse on faster, bringing him up short as he leapt off and ran to Katherine.

Before she could speak Rashid grabbed her. "Are you all right?" he cried. "My God, Katherine. I thought I'd never find you again."

"Let me go," she protested, trying to break free.

"You could have died out there," he said. "It's a miracle you didn't." He held her away from him. "Are you sure you're all right? God, your skin is on fire."

In the excitement of seeing Rashid, she'd forgotten that she was wearing only a lace bra and skimpy satin panties. With a gasp of embarrassment she tried to pull away so that she could cover herself, but Rashid tightened his grip as his eyes slowly raked her.

"You're beautiful," he said at last. Then he pulled her into his arms again and his mouth found hers in a kiss that totally possessed her.

"I was so afraid," he whispered against her lips. "When I found the jeep..." His voice broke. "Why did you run away like that? Do you hate me that much, Katherine?"

"Rashid, please..."

"Damn you! Damn you for making me want you like I do." Again his mouth covered hers as with a strangled cry he swept her off her feet and carried her into the shade. Before she could speak he ripped his burnoose off and forced her down on the rough material.

"I've waited too long," he said. "Too long."

"No! No, don't!" Katherine cried, but his mouth covered hers, and when she struggled beneath him, his hand fastened on the lace bra, sliding it off as he leaned to kiss her breasts. Roughly, feverishly, he scraped the tender nipples with his tongue and his teeth, then with a low cry pulled her underpants down over her hips.

Katherine struck him a glancing blow on the side of his face that made him curse in anger. He drew back, swiftly disrobed and caught her to him.

Every inch of their naked bodies touched. He tangled his fingers in her golden hair, holding her head while his mouth sought hers. His hand slid down her body to her belly, her hips, the silken triangle.

"I've wanted to touch you like this from the moment I saw you seven years ago," he murmured. "And that night at Rabat, when you were all white and gold and so beautiful. Oh

God, Katherine, I've wanted you for such a long time."

When she tried to push him away the muscles of his shoulders tensed. His hard-as-steel legs tightened around her. She could feel his quick tortured breathing as he whispered, "I want you. I want you," and then thrust himself into her.

Katherine cried out, fists flailing against him until he pinned her wrists to the ground, plunging again into her tender flesh.

"Oh, the feel of you," he cried. "The sweet warm feel of you."

His movements quickened and when she cried out his mouth found hers again, more gently this time, and his hands soothed and caressed. His body moved against hers, slower, deeper, enveloping her in his maleness.

Deep within her something stirred. She fought, tightening her body, trying to hold herself aloof, trying to deny the insidious warmth that grew and spread.

"I hate you," she whispered. "Oh how I—"

He took her words into his mouth. When his tongue touched hers his movements quickened. She felt him grow taut, heard the sharp intake of his breath. Then, with a cry that was part joy and part anguish, his body was still and he whispered her name against her lips.

For a long time he didn't speak. He lay, his body covering hers, his face lost in the tangle of her hair. When finally he stirred, he said, "I'm sorry..." and traced the line of her face, pushing her hair back.

"Will you let me go, please?" Katherine kept her voice as cold as ice, but she couldn't meet his eyes.

"No, I won't." He kissed her neck. "Now be still and let me rest."

He slept, and after a while, Katherine did too. Slept to dream of hot summer afternoons and her grandfather's house in Portland. She was warm, but it wasn't unpleasant, and she stretched a lazy cat stretch. Ummm... a lovely tide of feeling suffused her body. Another tentative movement brought even greater pleasure, a sensual—

Her eyes flew open and above her, she saw Rashid.

"What...?"

As he kissed her, his tongue slipped into her mouth and she shivered, still half asleep, unable to fight this strange reality of him inside her, moving slowly against her body as his tongue caressed her swollen lips.

When his lips moved down her throat she gave a small moan of protest.

"Shh," he murmured as his tongue touched one peaked nipple, circling it slowly before he took it in his mouth. All the while he moved against her, growing, warming, exciting.

Katherine's body arched against his. "Don't," she protested.

But his lips persisted, caressing first one then the other breast with his lips and his silken tongue, tenderly now as though trying to kiss away the hurt he'd inflicted before. When his mouth found hers again his hands slipped under her shoulders to draw her closer.

Katherine had never felt like this, never felt this terrible reaching, this demand for fulfillment. Her body quivered with passion, her fingers tightened in his hair and she cried his name as she pressed close to him.

"Rashid," she murmured against his skin. "Rashid."

"Look at me," he commanded. "Know that I am Rashid Ben Hasir and that you belong to me."

"No!" Katherine's nails raked his back and he gasped in pain. "I don't belong to you," she cried, even as her body lifted to his and the hands that had wounded moved to press him closer.

His mouth found hers and his body plunged against her. It was too much. Past bearing. She closed her eyes and tasted the skin of his shoulder, rubbed her face against the matted hair of his chest, wanting to get closer to this man with the dark desert eyes.

His hands tightened on her as he whispered her name against her lips and suddenly, with a cry, her body exploded into a thousand shimmering pieces of golden light. Up and up into the blue sky, the bright sun that blinded her, lifted her, made her cry his name over and over as his arms tightened around her and he whispered her name triumphantly against her mouth.

AS TWILIGHT settled over the oasis Rashid rose and carried Katherine to the pool. The world was still and deserted. They were alone, two people in the vastness of this quiet place.

The fading sunlight struck Rashid's naked body, making his dark skin glow as he bent to catch the drops of water off Katherine's peaked pink breasts, to lap with a gentle tongue the sweetness of her.

Too tired to protest, bewildered by all that had happened, she stood within the circle of his arms and let him do what he would with her.

When finally he led her out of the pool, he watered Corsair. Then he made a bed of fronds and moss under the palm trees, covered over with his burnoose.

"Come," he said in a gentle voice. And when she did he lay beside her, and held her until she slept.

KATHERINE BISHOP. Rashid smiled as he brushed his chin against her hair. What made her different from all other women? What special magic did she have that made him want her so?

Now he had possessed her—this woman who was betrothed to his brother. He had committed an unforgivable act. But it was an act for which he could not be sorry. He had taken her and he knew that he would never let her go.

Sooner or later he would have to face Jamal and tell him. Rashid's arms tightened around Katherine. And he would have to ask him about the woman in Tangier.

For over a year now there had been rumors that Jamal was living with a woman in Tangier. Rashid hadn't spoken to him about this because his brother was of age. But when Katherine came back into Jamal's life, Rashid had sent a man to Tangier. And Jamal was in France because he wanted him out of the way while he checked.

He also wanted Jamal out of Morocco while he tried to convince Katherine that Jamal wasn't the man for her—and that he was. But he'd made a mess of it.

When finally she was in his arms, the joy and anger and passion had gotten all mixed up and he'd taken her, like some wild brute, there on the sand.

"Forgive me, my love," he whispered as he kissed the top of her head. "I can't let you go now—now that I know what magic could be between us."

He had to get them out of here. Tomorrow, he told himself. Have to sleep... tired... so tired.

SO TIRED that he didn't hear the first faint rustle of wind in the palms or see the clouds cover the stars.

It was Corsair who gave the first warning, neighing as he strained on his tether. Suddenly Rashid woke and put his hand on Katherine's shoulder. "Wake up!" His voice was urgent. "There's a storm coming."

Rolling to his feet as she reached for her djellaba, he grabbed his burnoose and pulled it over his head. "Pull the headpiece around so that it covers your nose. We're in for a *shergi*. Fill both the canteens, then gather as many dates as you can. There's fruit and bread in the saddlebag. I'm going to water Corsair. Then I'll try to fix up some kind of a shelter."

He knew how bad this could be. Sometimes these *shergis* went on for days. The sand would drift, covering the date palms, even covering the water holes. This was a small oasis and vulnerable to a severe storm.

There was a three-foot wall of rock that someone had built at another time, and he set about trying to find rocks to add to it. The sand swirled, making it difficult to see further than a few feet.

They worked for over an hour. Corsair grew more and more restive. Rashid let the horse drink again and then he tied him closer to the en-

sure. By now the wind was so bad they could barely see.

They sat with their backs against the wall as the day grew darker and the wind stronger. "Keep your head down," Rashid told her. "Try to cover your nose and mouth."

Katherine's eyes were wide with fright. The storm on the night she had escaped had been bad. But not like this. She felt blinded by the sand, smothered in it.

So much had happened to her, both physically and emotionally, that she felt drained. She knew her survival depended on Rashid—they would live or perish together.

He had taken her by force yesterday. But later he had aroused her as no man ever had. She was not a sexual innocent, but she hadn't dreamed she could feel the way Rashid had made her feel. She hated him, yet she had responded to him. Now her life depended on him.

Hours passed and the wind grew worse. Corsair neighed in fright and Rashid went to him time and time again, trying to reassure him.

"When will it end?" Katherine shouted.

"It could end by nightfall. But sometimes... it can go on for several days."

"Can we survive that long?"

"Of course we can. Don't be foolish. We've got water and food. Why don't you try to sleep?"

Sleep! she thought. I can't even breathe. "I'm thirsty," she said. "Should I drink from the canteen?"

"No. It's better to drink from the pond while we can." He grasped her hand. "Come on, let's make a run for it."

The wind hit her with a terrible force, throwing her against Rashid. Together they struggled toward the water and she got down on her stomach to drink. After she'd finished she said, "What about Corsair?"

Rashid nodded and went to the stallion. The great horse rolled his eyes in fright and reared back, almost jerking the reins from Rashid's hand.

"Easy," Rashid soothed. "Easy, boy." He relaxed his hold while Corsair drank, but suddenly the wind grew stronger, bending the palms, sending a frond flying across the stallion's head. The horse reared up too swiftly for Rashid to tighten his hold on the reins.

"Corsair!" Rashid cried. But it was too late. With a frenzied whinny the stallion bolted.

"Catch him!" Katherine screamed. "He'll die out there!" The wind tore at her, whipping her hair around her face.

"Get back behind the shelter," Rashid ordered. "Corsair's gone."

"But he'll—" She stopped, biting hard on her lower lip.

"He'll die." His voice was harsh with pain. "And there isn't a damn thing I can do about it."

The wind raged all that night. A dozen times Katherine and Rashid scooped sand out of their fortlike shelter. When they weren't doing that they tried to rest, their backs against the stone wall.

The storm went on all the next day. They moved from their shelter only to drink from the pool that was by now half-filled with sand. They ate the fruit and chewed the hard bread. The rest of the time they huddled together.

The wind stopped some time the next night and they slept. When they

woke, the shape of the desert had changed. Some of the date palms were almost covered by sand. The pond had disappeared.

"What will we do now?" Katherine asked.

"We move on," Rashid said.

"But...but where?" The thought of going out into the desert again filled her with fear.

"We can't stay here, Katherine. There's no more water." He turned her to face him. "But we have the canteens and we have food. My men are out looking for us. Either they'll find us or we'll find another oasis. We're going to be all right."

She adjusted the canteen that hung around her neck. Then, with one last look at the oasis said, "I'm ready."

*

THE FIRST few hours were not too bad, but by noon the desert was an inferno. Silence brooded over the sun-scorched sand. Dunes, like the towers of a dream city, rose against the clear blue sky. Heat shimmered in an endless sea of light, hurting their eyes, blinding them as they peered out at the desert through dark enveloping folds of cloth.

"Eat a few dates," Rashid told her. "Keep a pit in your mouth, it will help."

"I want to rest awhile," she protested.

"Walk!" he commanded. "Walk!"

One foot ahead of the other. One step at a time. A giant step. May I take a giant step? Yes you may. "Oops," she said. "Getting a little tired. Too much sun. Time to go in now."

"Keep going, Katherine," the man beside her said.

She began to hum to herself, then suddenly, abruptly, stopped and thought, I'm going to die. Well! Well!

That was when she saw the hooded black figures coming toward her over a sand dune. Come to carry her off... to the sweet by and by....

WATER DRIBBLED down her chin. A hand raised her head and she opened her mouth and drank before she lapsed again into unconsciousness.

When next she woke, she was braced against Rashid and they were mounted on a horse. Although it seemed to be early evening, the air still hadn't cooled.

"So hot," she complained. Then with her head against his chest she drifted off again.

Later, when she woke, clad only in her bra and panties, a strange woman was bathing her.

"Where's Rashid?" Katherine asked.

The woman looked at her without answering. Then she handed her a clean white robe and left. By the time Katherine had put the robe on the woman returned with a bowl of rice and meat.

After she had eaten the woman brought her a glass of hot mint tea. She pointed to herself and said, "Zahira."

Katherine nodded. "Katherine," she said as she took the glass and nodded her thanks.

For the first time she looked around. She was in a large black tent. All of the sides were rolled up. Rugs, like the one she had been lying on, partly covered the ground. There were pillows and a small low table.

It seemed that a miracle had happened: they had been saved. She didn't

know where she was or who these people were, but for now at least she was safe.

It was daylight when she woke. Rashid was on his knees beside her.

"How do you feel this morning?"

"All right, I think. I slept well." She sat up and stretched. "Where are we?"

"In a nomad camp."

"Allah must have been watching over us," she said, trying to keep her voice light. "What will we do now?"

"I've talked to the head man, Madih. He doesn't have any camels now because some of his men have gone to Tafilet. It's a long trip, but when they come back and have rested they'll take us to Erfoud."

"When will they be back?"

"Not for several weeks."

"Several weeks! Isn't there any other way we can get out?"

"There are horses, but Mustafa says they can't make that long a trip. I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Everyone will think we're dead. My father and mother—" Her voice broke.

"I'm sorry," Rashid said again. "Believe me, I wish there was something I could do, but there isn't. We have to make the best of this."

"If you hadn't tricked me into flying with you..."

"I know what I did was wrong," he broke in. "Once we leave this place I'll try to make everything right again. Meantime all we can do is wait. These are decent people, Katherine. No harm will come to us. Mustafa has given us this tent—"

"Us? You mean we have to stay here together?"

"I told him you were my wife." He held up a cautioning hand. "It was the

only way I could protect you. There are single men here. If they think you belong to me they won't bother you." His voice hardened. "So for the time that we're here you'll conduct yourself as though you were my wife, especially in front of the others. When I tell you to do something you'll do it. Is that clear?"

"I'll do as I please," she snapped.

"You do and you'll get a cuff on the side of the head, the same as these women do when they talk back."

Katherine shot him a hate-filled look and he said, "I have to behave like one of them while we're here. I have no choice and neither do you."

He handed her the makeup case. "Here," he said, "maybe this will improve your disposition." Then before she could answer he left the tent.

She glared after him, then opened the case and reached for the mirror. She was a mess! Her face was burned, her lips swollen. And her hair! She could have wept. Instead she went outside to look around.

The minute Katherine stepped two feet away from the tent she was surrounded by silent children, who looked at her with large dark eyes.

"Hi." Katherine smiled. "I'm looking for some water." She cupped her hand, pretending to drink.

"*Al má,*" a boy of about ten said.

A woman came out of one of the tents. She was not veiled, but her hands and feet were tinted with henna.

"*Al má,*" Katherine said, and pointed to her hair.

"Ah." The woman said something to the boy, who disappeared for a few moments, returning with two pails of water.

"*Shûkrân,*" Katherine said. "Thank you." With the children tagging behind she went to the entrance of her tent and, kneeling down, doused her hair in one of the pails of water and began to scrub it with the soap she had brought from Rashid's.

The children stared at her fair hair in fascination. She held the soap out so a little girl, braver than the rest, could smell it. The child wrinkled her nose and giggled. Katherine dunked her head into the bucket again and all the children laughed. Then the boy who had brought the water motioned her to bend down so that he could pour the other pail of water over her head.

Katherine nodded, yipping in dismay when, instead of pouring it gently, he dumped all of it in one huge splash.

He looked as shocked as she did when she raised her head, gasping. But then she grinned and tousled his hair, while the children around them burst into ripples of laughter.

Rashid, just coming out of one of the tents, stopped to watch her with the children. A slow smile curved his mouth.

AT DUSK, he came to the tent they were to share.

"Zahira is cooking our dinner tonight," he said. "Tomorrow she'll show you how to prepare the food so that you can cook for us."

"I have no intention of cooking for you," Katherine snapped.

"You will if you want to eat." Rashid got up then and took two bowls from Zahira. "*Shûkrân,*" he said. He handed one to Katherine.

They ate without speaking and when they were finished, Katherine glanced

at him. Her eyes were wary. She had already picked a spot at the far end of the tent where she intended to sleep. She was about to move toward it when Rashid said, "Just a moment. I want to talk to you. Would you like to sit down?"

"I prefer to stand."

"Very well." His gaze met hers as he continued. "When I took you from Rabat it was with the idea of talking you out of marrying Jamal. But the idea of a relationship with me, you seemed to find . . . reprehensible."

"You're right so far."

"You would have lived well, Katherine. We'd have divided our time between the desert, my home in Casablanca and the apartment in Paris." Before she could step back he put his hands on her shoulders so she couldn't pull away. In a quiet voice he said, "Look at me, Katherine."

In the evening shadows his face was ruggedly handsome. The clean white robe only seemed to emphasize his masculinity, the width of his shoulders, the breadth of his chest. She could smell the scent of the desert on his skin and see the passion of the desert in his eyes.

His expression was solemn, his voice quiet when he said, "I'm sorry, Katherine. This wasn't what I had planned for you. But there isn't anything I can do about it now. When we get back to civilization I'll let you go—if you still want to—but for whatever time we have here in the desert we're going to be together."

Katherine's eyes widened. "Together?"

"In every sense of the word."

When she backed away he reached out to stop her. "For the weeks that

we're here you'll be my mistress, my wife, my love. I'm going to have my way, Katherine, with or without your consent." He took her hand, brought it to his lips and continued more softly, "I suspect you feel things for me you're afraid to admit, even to yourself. This is my chance to show you how it could be for us. If I can't convince you that there's something very special between us, then I'll let you go."

"There's nothing between us." Katherine jerked her hand away. "There'll never be anything." Turning her back she started out of the tent, but Rashid scooped her up in his arms.

"I'm going to do my damndest to prove you're wrong," he said. The strong arms tightened around her. She felt the brush of his lips against her cheek. Before she could protest, he carried her to a pile of rugs and pillows at one end of the tent and, when she struggled against him, he dropped her on them. Kneeling over her, he said, "I want it to be like it was at the oasis when I found you. I want you to cry my name again and lift your body to mine the way you did before."

She felt the thudding beat of her heart, the flame of remembrance whisper through her trembling body.

"No," she protested. "It wasn't like that."

"You're a beautiful liar." He pushed her back against the rugs and his mouth found hers. "Liar," he said again as his tongue invaded the recesses of her mouth. His body was over hers, pinning her to the ground while he kissed her.

Katherine tried to force him away from her, but his mouth continued to

devour her and his hands moved over her body.

Suddenly he sat up and yanked his robe off, then, pulling her to a sitting position, drew the white garment over her head. When he saw the wisps of lace that partially covered her, he bent to kiss the fullness spilling over the delicate bra. She struck out at him and he grabbed her wrists in one hand, holding them while he buried his face between her breasts.

"You smell so good," he whispered as he slipped the bra off her shoulders. His arms went around her, holding her close while his lips moved to her temple, then down the line of her jaw to kiss the tender skin behind her ear. Holding her so that she was helpless against him, he kissed her breast.

"I love these," he whispered. "Some day when I'm not as hungry for you as I am now I'm going to kiss them for hours. Kiss them until you beg me to stop."

His tongue, a dart of fire, touched one peaked nipple and when she quivered, he lapped at it, teasing with his tongue until she cried aloud. Then his mouth found hers and he kissed her, taking her lower lip between his teeth while his tongue caressed it. His arms tightened around her and he turned her on her side. Again his mouth went to her breasts and his tongue scorched circles of fire around and around her nipples, kissing them, thrilling with excitement when she trembled against him.

She was held, captured by his body and the hands that touched her, the lips that burned against her skin. For a moment she closed her eyes and allowed herself to surrender to the warmth that flooded her body. Not

even aware that she was doing it, she moved closer into the circle of his arms with a small purr of pleasure.

His lips were gentle now as they left her breasts to travel down her body, feathering kisses that left her breathless with desire. He kissed the inside of her thighs and she gasped. "Don't," she whispered as his lips traveled upward. "No one has ever—"

"Then I'll be the first. I'll be the only and the last." He grasped her hands and, bringing them to her sides, held her while she writhed against him. Her body was on fire; her nerve ends, like tiny electric wires, shot bolt after bolt of live current through her. She heard, as though from a distance, her own frantic whimperings.

When he let go of her hands to reach for her breasts, she grasped his shoulders, meaning to thrust him away, but instead caressing him.

When her breath came in gasps of pleasure and she began to tremble, he let her go and with a hoarse cry joined his body to hers. Holding her shoulders, he pulled her closer as he moved deep within her, carrying her up and up on a tide of feeling that was beyond ecstasy.

"Katherine," he cried against her lips as his body, strong now with need, moved against her. His hips ground against hers as she lifted herself to meet his every thrust and heard his sighs of pleasure.

She was reaching now for that ultimate rainbow of feeling, quivering with need as she smothered her cry against his shoulder, whispering his name as she felt his arms tighten, as he buried his face against her hair and shuddered over her in an agony of pleasure.

Afterward Katherine tried to move away, but he held her close in his embrace.

"Let me go," she whispered.

"Shh," he said. "Shh," and began to caress the length of her with gentle hands until finally she sighed against him and went to sleep.

THE CARAVAN of camels arrived at the camp three weeks later. After they had rested for several days, Mustafa Madih chose two of the drivers to take Katherine and Rashid to Erfoud.

Their time in the desert had come to an end. All that would remain was the memory of black tents, of an endless expanse of golden sands and glorious sunsets. And of a man, Katherine thought, whose kisses I'll never forget.

She and Rashid were easier with each other now. It was as though they both knew their time together had almost ended. There had been so much anger, so much pain and passion. So many things said and unsaid.

That night for dinner Katherine cooked shishkabob and the flat beans that Zahira, with much hissing and scolding, had taught her to prepare.

"This is pretty good," Rashid said with a smile. "Another few weeks out here and Zahira might make you a gourmet cook."

"Or hiss herself to death trying." Katherine refilled his bowl. "It's strange how you can adjust, isn't it?"

"Adjust?" The dark brows raised in question.

Katherine nodded. "I've grown accustomed to men wearing robes and women with tattooed faces and henna'd hands. When I get back to civilization it will be strange to see men in

trousers and women with makeup." She made a face. "I doubt if I'll be able to cook as well in a microwave as I do over a brazier."

"Maybe you should take Zahira home with you."

"Allah forbid!" she said with a grin. Then suddenly she sobered. Home. Where was her home now? When Rashid had brought her to his home at the edge of the Sahara she'd been unable to understand his fascination for the desert. But that had changed; she had changed. There was a rhythm, a mysticism about the desert that she now found strangely moving. She loved the special magic about this time of evening when there were still remnants of the setting sun and the sky was aglow with a miracle of color.

Tonight as she sat next to this man she had professed to hate and watched the rise of a full moon against the desert sky, Katherine felt a sadness almost too profound to bear. Perhaps Rashid sensed it, for when darkness settled over the camp he took her hand and said, "Come, let's walk for a while."

Silently they made their way through the camp, to the edge of the sand dunes. When Katherine hesitated Rashid said, "We'll only go a little way." Over the sweeping dunes into a world of quiet and solitude, following the path of the moon and the shadows of the sand.

When Katherine stopped, Rashid's arms encircled her waist and they stood for long minutes, looking out into the desert night. When he let her go he pulled the burnoose over his head and spread it on the sand.

In the light of the moon his naked body was the most gracefully beauti-

ful thing Katherine had ever seen. He stood, legs apart, looking down at her, smooth skinned, firm muscled, a brooze David.

They lay together on the burnoose, their bodies melding as one on the soft warm bed of desert sand. They kissed slowly and sweetly, both of them aware that this was the last time they would join in this act of love. For now, each of them secretly could call it love.

Her breasts were touched by moonlight when he bent to kiss them, her wheat hair turned to gold.

Rashid whispered Arabic words she couldn't understand as he stroked her. At last he raised his body over hers and, looking deeply into her eyes, leaned to kiss her lips as he entered her. He moved slowly, languorously, savoring every moment. When Katherine lifted herself to him he found her mouth again, gently demanding.

Her hands traced tender patterns against his back, creeping down to touch the line of his firm round buttocks, loving the silky feel of them.

Their rhythm was as quiet as the rhythm of the desert, the shifting, the sighing, the sudden swift cry when the passion deepened. The whispered pleas, the sweet urgings, the anxious questioning. The final "Yes, oh yes, oh yes . . .".

They lay together for a long time looking up at the million stars that were their ceiling, at the moon that was their light. But they didn't speak of all the things they were feeling, and when the desert air grew cool they put on their clothes and went back to the camp.

*

FATIMA RETURNED the clothes Katherine had arrived in, as well as the suitcase she had packed when she believed she was going to Marrakesh. It seemed odd, after more than a month of wearing caftans and djellabas, to dress in a skirt and blouse and high heels.

The Berber woman hovered over her and insisted on helping her pack, but when she began taking the underwear out of the drawer Katherine stopped her.

"No," she said, pointing to the clothes in her suitcase. "I'm only taking the clothes I brought with me."

Fatima threw up her hands, opened the closet doors and pointed to the caftans and rows of shoes, but Katherine snapped the suitcase closed. "That's all there is, Fatima." She handed her the bag and walked her to the door.

When she was alone she looked around the room for one last time. The bottles of perfume were lined up on the dressing table next to the monogrammed comb and brush set. Once she closed the door it would be as if she'd never been here.

The table had been set in the dining room. There was a bouquet of orange-red poppies in the center. A pitcher of martinis stood on the sideboard.

When she entered Rashid said, "I thought you might like a drink before lunch."

Katherine nodded. "Yes, thank you, I would."

"To your health," he said, like a polite stranger.

"This is delicious." Her face felt frozen; the hand holding the glass trembled.

"We can leave for Rabat right after lunch."

"Fine."

He pulled out her chair and as he started around the table they heard the screech of brakes. Rashid said, "I can't imagine who that can be, but..."

Loud voices came from the entrance. "I'd better go see who it is," he said. "I'll just be a moment."

But before he could move a man's voice shouted, "Damn it, boy, wait a minute!" Then Jamal, with his grandfather two steps behind him, burst into the room. He looked from Katherine to Rashid. His handsome face was pale, his hands clenched at his sides.

For a moment Rashid stared at them. "This is a surprise," he said. "Would you care to join us for lunch?"

"You bastard! How dare you act as though nothing has happened?" Jamal shouted. Then he ran to Katherine and, gripping her shoulders, cried, "Are you all right, Kathy?"

"Yes... yes, Jamal. I'm fine."

"He tricked you into coming here, didn't he?" His hands tightened on her shoulders.

"Yes," Rashid said. "I told her you were in Marrakesh and that I'd fly her there to meet you."

Jamal thrust Katherine aside and turned to his brother. But before he could speak his grandfather cut in.

"In the name of Allah, why?" the old man roared. "Are you saying you kidnapped Miss Bishop?"

Rashid's face was cold. "Yes, Grandfather."

"Damn you!" Jamal cried as he doubled his fist and drove it into Rashid's face.

Blood spurted from his mouth as he staggered back.

"Stop it!" Katherine cried.

But Jamal was past listening. He struck Rashid again and when his brother didn't strike back Jamal shouted, "Fight back, damn you. Fight back!"

"Stop!" Katherine's scream filled the room. She tried to pull Jamal away from Rashid. "Leave him alone!" she cried. "I love him!"

Jamal's hand froze in midair. His face went white.

Katherine said, "I'm sorry, Jamal. But it's true."

No one spoke. Rashid put his hand to his bloody face. His eyes were wide with shock. "Katherine," he whispered, then started toward her.

With a low cry she backed away from him and ran out of the room, down the corridor to the room she thought she'd left forever. She slammed the door and sat on the bed, taking deep gulping breaths.

When the door opened she looked up and saw that it was Youssef. "Are you ill, daughter?" he asked.

Katherine shook her head, trying to fight back the tears that the kindness in his voice released. "It was so awful, Youssef. It was my fault, all of it."

"No, my dear, you're not to blame. I knew the first time I saw you that some day there would be something between you and Rashid. There was a feeling, an electricity in the air when the two of you were together."

"He didn't even like me then."

"Perhaps, but it was plain to see that he wanted you."

"For his mistress," she said. "That's why he brought me here. Rashid doesn't believe that a marriage between a Moroccan and a foreigner is possible—not for Jamal, not for him."

"I see." The old man sat down on the bed beside her and took her hand. "He's seen my example, of course, so he thinks such a marriage couldn't possibly work."

Katherine nodded. "He doesn't love me," she said. "Not the way I want to be loved." She got up and threw open the closet doors. "This is the way he loves me." She indicated the caftans, the jeweled slippers.

"My grandsons are idiots," he said. "If I were thirty years younger I'd take you away from both of them." He stood beside her and putting a finger under her chin, lifted it. "I'm going to take you to Marrakesh where you can rest and get some color back in your cheeks. Then you can think about what you're going to do. Have you packed?"

"Yes, Fatima took my bag."

When they reached the living room they saw Rashid sitting with his head back, his eyes closed. Before he could get to his feet his grandfather said, "I'm taking Katherine back to Marrakesh with me."

Rashid nodded. "I'd like to speak to her first."

"Then I'll wait in the car."

Rashid motioned her to sit beside him. His face had been cleaned. Patches covered the cuts.

"Are you all right, Rashid?"

"Yes."

"Where's Jamal?"

"He's in his room. I'll talk to him when he's calmer." He picked a stack of mail up off the table beside the sofa

and extracted a letter. "Not that it matters now," he said, "but this is a letter from a business associate of mine in Tangier. It came while we were in the desert." He hesitated. "For several years now I've heard talk of a woman Jamal visits in Tangier."

Katherine looked at him, puzzled.

"When you and Jamal announced your engagement I asked my associate to check on her." He handed the letter to Katherine. "You can read it later but I'll tell you what it says." He ran a hand through his dark hair. "Jamal has been married for two years."

"Married! But he was going to marry me."

"Of course. And it would have been perfectly legal."

"But—" She stared at him in disbelief. "I would have been number two," she said.

"Jamal loves you, Katherine. In his own way."

"Yes, I suppose he does." She stood up. "But it doesn't matter now. Whatever there was between Jamal and me was finished a long time ago."

"What about us, Katherine?"

"There is no us, Rashid."

"You said you loved me."

"I do. That makes me a special kind of a fool, doesn't it?"

"Katherine." He touched her face. "I should have told you weeks ago that I loved you."

She moved away. "You don't have to say that, Rashid. I know how you feel about me."

"No, you don't. Didn't you hear what I just said? I love you, Katherine. I've loved you for a long time."

She shook her head, averting her eyes. With all her heart Katherine wished she could believe him. And

perhaps he did love her—in his fashion. If she became his mistress she'd be well taken care of.

"Goodbye, Rashid," she said.

"I won't let you go!" But before he could touch her, his grandfather appeared.

"I'm taking Katherine out of here now," he said. "I'm taking her away from you."

"Damn it, Grandfather—"

"Don't try to stop me. You've done enough to this girl."

"Katherine, I have to talk to you."

Rashid's voice held a note of panic she'd never heard before.

She shook her head. "We've said it all."

THE HOUSE in Marrakesh was a quiet haven of rest.

On the morning after her arrival Youssef placed a call to Katherine's parents. After reassuring them that she was fine, she told them that she'd broken her engagement to Jamal. Her mother immediately burst into tears. Her father said if that damn A-rab had done anything to hurt her he'd get on the first plane to Marrakesh and thrash him within an inch of his life.

She knew now that she'd fallen out of love with Jamal years ago. If it hadn't been for wanting to show Rashid that she wasn't a twenty-year-old who'd let him direct her life, she would never have agreed to marry Jamal.

She phoned Wade Contney and was informed by his secretary that he was unavailable. When she asked about the status of her job she was told that he'd put her on a six-month leave of absence and recommended her for a post in Somalia. Somalia? Wade must know

she'd never accept. It seemed that her career in the foreign service was at an end.

With a wry grin she put the phone down, then called a company in Geneva whose vice-president had approached her at an embassy party several months before about coming to work for them. The man arranged an appointment for the first of October.

For now it was nice to rest. Youssef was a wonderful host. He insisted Katherine sleep as long as she could in the morning. When she woke she had only to ring her bedside bell and by the time she'd bathed her breakfast arrived. Youssef took her out to dinner almost every night, and constantly bought her presents.

"I can't accept this," Katherine said over and over.

"Nonsense, daughter. It's only a trinket. Give it to one of the servants if you don't like it."

Often they sat together out in the garden in the evening while he reminisced.

"I lost my oldest boy, Hassan, when he was only twelve," Youssef said. "He was a wonderful boy, a good scholar, a loving child. Ibrahim, Rashid and Jamal's father, was a good student too, but a little wild. He was killed in a car accident when my grandsons were young. By then my wife, Monique, was back in Paris. I kept Rashid and Jamal with me every summer."

He looked at Katherine, his face thoughtful. "It was interesting, how different they were even then. Jamal was a lot like his uncle Hassan. But I think Rashid was—and is—more like me."

Katherine smiled. "Yes, I think so too."

"You love him, do you?"

"Yes." She hesitated. "It happened so gradually, Youssef. I hated him for so long because of what he'd done years ago. Then out there in the desert, I felt . . . I was terribly attracted to him. But I couldn't accept the fact that I might be falling in love."

"Were you lovers at the nomad camp?" he asked.

"Yes, Youssef. I know it's hard for you to understand, but sometimes love is beyond explanation."

"Is it really?" A slight smile curved his mouth. "Why is it that young people always think older people can't understand? There have been women in my life, daughter, but only one that I felt about as I think Rashid feels about you—Monique St. Onge, the woman who is still my wife."

Because it was a night for confidences, Katherine said, "Tell me about her."

"She's beautiful. I haven't lived with her for twenty years and I haven't seen her in eight, but I know she's still beautiful. She's small and blond, classically French."

Youssef leaned back in his chair. "Morocco was a French protectorate until 1956. Monique's father was governor. I was in college then and belonged to a group of student radicals who were determined to throw the French out of Morocco. My father, who didn't approve of my actions, insisted I go with him to a governor's reception.

"I didn't want to go, but one didn't argue with one's father back then. I'm afraid I was unforgivably rude to everyone I talked to. Then I saw Monique.

"She was springtime," he said simply. "Springtime in a green dress. She wore satin slippers and she carried a chiffon scarf that fluttered from her fingers each time she spoke." He looked away from Katherine, cleared his throat, and with a forced smile said, "I was in love. Hopelessly, angrily in love."

"Angrily?"

"I hated the French and here I was enraptured by a French woman. We were introduced and I think I said something rude because I remember that she raised one perfect eyebrow and turned away to speak to someone else. But as soon as she detached herself from a group I went up to her and said, 'I'd like to speak to you, *mademoiselle*.'"

He chuckled. "She said, 'I can't imagine why, *monsieur*. It's obvious that you and I have nothing to say to each other.'"

"So I took her arm and before she could say another word I waltzed her away to a small side garden that was hidden by a stand of willows. When we stopped I pulled her into my arms and kissed her."

"What did she say to that?"

"Nothing. But she hit me so hard my teeth rattled."

Katherine laughed. "Good for her! What did you do then?"

"I slapped her back." He held up a cautioning hand. "Before you say anything let me tell you that was the first and the last time I ever raised a hand to Monique. But you see, I'd been raised thinking women were second-class citizens. It was a reflex action; I did it before I thought."

"What happened then?" she said.

"Monique started to cry. I looked at her, at that perfect white face with the imprint of my hand getting redder and redder, and I wanted to kill myself. I pulled her back into my arms. She struggled for a minute or two but then quieted down. We just stood there, daughter, me shaking like a leaf, and I kissed her again. I knew then I'd never get enough of her.

"When I finally took her back to the party her father jumped all over me. I asked him if I could call on Monique and he said no. But that night, I waited, hoping she might come out into the garden after dark. When she did I asked her to marry me."

"That fast?"

"That fast," he said. "Three days later we ran away. We took a boat to Cádiz, found a priest who'd marry us and made our way to Granada. We honeymooned there for a week and then we went to Venice." He leaned back, eyes closed. "Spring blossomed into summer and we didn't want to leave; we wanted to float along the Grand Canal forever. It was the most wonderful time of my life."

Katherine dared not interrupt him, but finally he opened his eyes and said, "It was difficult for her to adjust when we came back to Morocco. She was used to going about as she pleased and a woman simply didn't go out like that here—not back in those days. Our differences eventually became irreconcilable and she left me. That was almost twenty years ago."

"That's a long time, Youssef. A long time to be alone. Isn't there some way you could reconcile?"

"No. I love Monique but I won't beg. If she ever comes back to me it'll be because she wants to."

"You've never thought of taking another wife?"

"Monique is my wife—my only wife."

For a long time they didn't speak, then Youssef said, "You go in now, daughter. It's late. I just want to sit here for a little while."

"All right." But Katherine hesitated. Youssef was such a strong man, yet at this minute he seemed so vulnerable. She put her hand on his shoulder, then kissed his cheek. Before he could speak she turned away, wanting to weep for all lost loves.

THREE DAYS LATER Katherine took the train to Rabat. She packed the things she wanted to keep and had them shipped back to the States. She wrote to her parents that she was leaving Morocco and that she'd write next from Madrid or Paris.

The day before she left she telephoned Youssef to say goodbye.

"If you decide to come back here," he said, "you always have a home with me in Marrakesh."

"Thank you, Youssef. Thank you for everything."

"If you go to Paris I'd appreciate it if you'd call on Monique. Would you mind?"

"No, of course not. Any message?"

"No, no message. Do you have enough money?"

Katherine smiled. "Yes, Youssef. Please don't worry."

"You'll write."

"Of course."

"You'll come back someday. I know you will."

"Perhaps."

Perhaps. But she wouldn't. This part of her life had finished. She knew she was like a toy Rashid wanted and would do anything to get—and she knew she couldn't live like that.

THE HOUSE at Number 28, Rue St. Croix de la Bretonnerie, was a narrow two-story brownstone that reminded Katherine of old New York apartments.

On the telephone that morning Monique St. Onge had sounded pleasant but reserved.

"I've just come from Morocco," Katherine had said. "Youssef Ben Hasir asked me to phone to say hello."

"How nice. How is Youssef?"

"He's quite well."

"And the boys, Jamal and Rashid?"

"They're fine."

"Are you enjoying Paris?"

"Yes, thank you, it's a lovely city."

Polite, forced conversation. Finally the polite, forced invitation to tea.

The woman who opened the door was in her late sixties. Her face, as smooth as that of a woman half her age, still had a gamine look. Her hair, a lovely soft white, was fashionably short. She wore a light blue dress and carried a blue chiffon scarf.

Before she thought, Katherine said, "Youssef told me you were carrying a chiffon scarf the first time he saw you."

Delicate eyebrows raised and the mouth softened. "I always hold a scarf when I'm nervous. It gives me something to do with my hands." Monique St. Onge opened the door wider. "Please come in, Miss Bishop."

She led Katherine through a foyer into one of the most charming rooms she had ever seen. The wallpaper was

pale blue, the thick carpeting a deeper blue. The furniture gleamed. A vase of pink roses adorned a table that had been set for tea.

"Would you like a glass of sherry?"

Monique said.

"Thank you."

She handed a glass to Katherine and said, "How long will you be in Paris?"

"I'm not sure. A week or two. Maybe longer."

"Are you on vacation?"

"In a way. I'm between jobs. I had been working at the United States Embassy in Rabat. I have an interview in Geneva the first of October."

"Then you'll have plenty of time to enjoy Paris." Monique set down her sherry. "How long have you known Youssef and my grandsons?"

"I've only known Youssef for a few months. I met Jamal over seven years ago when we were at Princeton."

The blue eyes widened. "*Alors!* Then you are the girl he was so crazy about! He stayed with me when he came back from the United States, while he attended the Sorbonne. For months he was desolate. Have you seen him recently?"

"Yes, *madame*, quiet recently. We were engaged a few months ago but the engagement has been broken."

"I see." The blue eyes looked at her quizzically.

Katherine lowered her gaze.

"Well, shall we have our tea?" Monique rose. "Youssef is well?" she asked.

"He's fine. He's a remarkable man."

"Yes, he is. Is he as handsome as

"Yes, he's handsome. And dynamic. He's been very kind to me, *madame*."

"You know it's odd," Monique said, "but I'd have thought you and Rashid far more suited than you and Jamal." She saw color creep into the young woman's face and looked at her more closely. This Miss Bishop was rather interesting. She was absolutely stunning, of course, but she seemed unhappy.

"Have a bit of *pâté*," she said. "The caviar is good too, if you like it."

"Yes, I'm fond of caviar." Katherine took a bite and felt her stomach lurch. She stared at her plate, willing herself to swallow. Then she took a sip of tea.

"Have you been to the Louvre?" Monique asked. "I understand there's a special exhibition—"

"I beg your pardon." Katherine pushed her chair back. "I wonder if I might use your bathroom?"

"Of course." The delicate eyebrows climbed. "Just down the hall, second door on your left."

Katherine, whose teeth were clenched, only nodded. She just made it to the bathroom before she was ill.

When she was able, she rinsed her mouth, splashed cold water on her face and smoothed her hair. She looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was pale and there were dark smudges beneath her eyes.

Monique looked up inquiringly when Katherine returned. "Are you all right?" she asked. "You look a bit pale."

"Traveling always upsets me. The change in the water, I suppose."

"The water? Are you sure that's all it is?"

"Yes, *madame*, quite sure."

"Let me pour you a hot cup of tea. That will help." She studied Katherine as the young woman sipped her tea, but when they stood at the door as Katherine was leaving, something about her touched Monique. The young woman was so obviously alone. So she said, "I'm having a small dinner party tomorrow night, Miss Bishop. Won't you come?"

"Thank you, *madame*, but—"

"Please, my dear. I insist. It's a small party, very informal. To tell you the truth, I'm short a woman. You'd really be doing me a great favor."

"Yes, all right," Katherine said. "Thank you."

IT WAS A GOOD PARTY, and Monique watched Katherine with growing approval. When it came time for her other guests to leave she put her hand on Katherine's arm and said, "Stay a bit, will you?"

After Monique said her farewells she came back into the living room. "I love to have company but I also love it when they leave. Let's have a brandy, shall we?"

"Are you sure? You must be tired. I'd be glad to help you clear up."

"My maid will be here in the morning. I'm going to be an absolute wretch and leave the mess for her." She swirled the brandy gently, warming the glass. In a carefully casual voice she asked, "Are you feeling better today?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Do you still think it was the water? Surely you drink bottled water."

"Yes, well... well perhaps it was something else."

Monique put the snifter down. "I had two children, Miss Bishop," she said gently. "I still remember how a woman looks when she's pregnant."

Every bit of color drained out of Katherine's face.

"You are pregnant, aren't you? Is the child Jamal's?"

Katherine's hands tightened around the glass. "No, *madame*."

"*Mon Dieu*, will you stop calling me *madame*? My name is Monique and I'd like to be your friend." She reached across and took Katherine's hand. "Now what do you mean the child isn't Jamal's? You were engaged to him. Has he run out on you because you're pregnant?"

Katherine shook her head. "We broke the engagement because I'm not in love with Jamal. After I broke it I found out that he already has a wife. But that really has nothing to do with it and it's just..." Katherine ran a tired hand across her face. "It's an awfully long story and it really is very late."

"Then why don't you spend the night? Look, *chérie*, I've got an extra bedroom. Let me give you a gown and make sure you're comfortable. We can talk in the morning."

"That's kind of you, but I should get back to the hotel."

"Nonsense." Monique got to her feet. "You mustn't run around Paris alone at this hour, not when I have a perfectly good guest room. Come along, I'm an old lady and it upsets me to have people argue with me."

It was easier to acquiesce, and in a strange way it felt good to have someone know about her pregnancy. She hadn't known about it when she left Morocco, but she carried Rashid's child. Sooner or later she'd have to

make a decision—not a decision about whether to have the baby. Of course she'd have it. But she had to decide whether or not to stay in Europe, what to tell the firm in Geneva and how she'd break the news to her parents. She still remembered her mixed feelings of joy and chagrin when the doctor in Madrid told her she was pregnant.

"INCREDIBLE!" Monique said when Katherine finished recounting all that had happened. "Do you mean to say that Rashid carried you away to that place of his, not only with the idea of getting you away from Jamal but of keeping you for himself?"

Katherine nodded and took a croissant from the breakfast cart Monique had wheeled into her room. "Yes, *madame*." She smiled. "Monique."

"The scoundrel! How dare he be so high-handed? Carrying you off to the desert like some modern-day sheik. Barbaric!" She began to pace up and down the room, blue dressing gown swishing behind her. "I love Rashid. He has great strength of character. But he had to grow up too fast. He became a man before he had the opportunity to be a boy."

She sat down and took a sip of coffee. "Do you love him, *chérie*?"

Katherine bowed her head. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I love him."

"Then don't you think you ought to tell him you're pregnant? I'm sure if he knew he'd forget that nonsense about your being his mistress and marry you."

"He doesn't really want to get married."

"But my dear Katherine, there's not a man alive who *wants* to get married.

Ninety-nine percent of the married men walking around today aren't quite sure how it happened."

Katherine frowned as she tried to explain. "Don't you see, it's not just Rashid—it's his country, his religion, his customs. I don't think I could accept them. I don't think I could live the kind of life he'd expect me to live." Her gaze met the other woman's. "Any more than you could, Monique."

The French woman stared at her. Then slowly she nodded and said, "So we turn our backs on the men we love and spend our lives wondering if we did the right thing." The blue eyes clouded with a look so lost, so vulnerable, that Katherine wanted to reach out and comfort her. But she said nothing.

That afternoon, at Monique's insistence, Katherine moved out of her hotel into the house on Rue St. Croix de la Bretonnerie. She'd known Monique for only a few days but it seemed much longer than that. There was a bond between the two women, the bond of being in love with the same kind of man.

"I love autumn in Paris," Monique said one late afternoon when the sun slanted in through the curtains. "There's nothing more pleasant than sitting in front of a fire watching the colors of Paris turn golden in the twilight." She smiled at Katherine. "Especially when you're with a friend."

"Thank you, Monique. I can't tell you what these past few weeks have meant to me."

"And to me, *chérie*. You are my almost granddaughter. You carry my great-grandchild."

"Monique..."

The Frenchwoman closed her eyes. "Have we done the right thing, Katherine?"

"What do you mean?"

"We've both left the men we love. Should we have stayed with them, loving them even though their ways are different from ours? Sometimes I think to myself, well, Monique St. Onge, here you are in this city you love, and you are alone. Is this what you wanted? You have your independence, but you have no one to share your joys or your sorrows, no one to hold you when the nights are cold."

She looked at Katherine, her blue eyes welling with tears. "There have been times, *chérie*, when the temptation to call Youssef was so overwhelming I thought I would die of it. Times when I wanted to cry out to him, 'Yes, I'll wear a veil. I'll stay in my room when you entertain. I'll do anything you want if you'll let me come home.'"

"Then why haven't you?" Katherine asked. "Why don't you?"

The answer was a small Gallic shrug. "Pride. And fear that after all these years Youssef doesn't want me."

"But he loves you! When he told me about you he said, 'Monique is my wife—my only wife.'"

"Then why doesn't he ask me to come back to him?"

"Because he's proud too. The same night, the night he told me about you, he said that he wouldn't beg, that if you ever came back it would be because you wanted to." Katherine's eyes glistened with tears. "Don't pay any attention to me, Monique. I've got pregnancy blues. I'll be all right tomorrow."

"You don't feel ill, do you?"

"No, I'm fine. Just edgy. Perhaps some tea will help."

But it didn't. Nor did the light supper Monique prepared. Katherine only picked at her food.

An hour after she had retired Monique checked on her. "Are you feeling better, *chérie*?"

"Yes, Monique, thank you. I'm tired, that's all. A good night's sleep will fix me up."

But she awoke some time in the night and knew that something was terribly wrong. She tried to sit up but a pain so enormous it took her breath made her fall back.

"Monique," she called. "Monique!"

In an instant the older woman threw open her door. "What is it, darling?"

"Monique," Katherine clamped down hard on her bottom lip before she could go on. "I think you'd better call a doctor."

IT WAS THE saddest night of Katherine's life.

The doctor, a short, white-haired man with a cherubic smile, sent Monique out of the room before he examined Katherine. Then, the smile gone, he phoned for an ambulance and told Monique she could go to the hospital with Katherine.

"I'm losing the baby," Katherine wept. "I don't want to lose it, Monique. I want Rashid's baby."

"I know, *chérie*."

"Don't tell him."

"Katherine, are you sure?"

"Promise you won't call him. He'll hate me for this."

"Hate you? Why should he hate you?"

"It's his child. I didn't tell him and now I'm losing it. He'll never forgive me."

"I promise, my dear," Monique said.

The lonely wail of the ambulance siren sounded in the quiet of the Paris night. Through eyes blurred by pain Katherine watched the slow drip of fluid into her arm. She was barely conscious when the ambulance screeched to a stop, and she felt Monique's lips against her forehead.

"Don't cry, Monique," she said.

"*Chérie*, oh, *chérie*, I'm so sorry."

"Me too."

Then Monique disappeared and Katherine was alone on a high white table under the glare of light. As the light dimmed she whispered, "Good-bye . . . goodbye, baby."

KATHERINE DIDN'T accept the job in Geneva. She didn't want to stay in Europe, but she wasn't sure she wanted to return to Maine. She also knew she couldn't impose forever on Monique's hospitality.

When Monique suggested they pretend they were tourists, Katherine agreed. They went to Montmartre to see Sacré-Coeur and to Versailles, its gardens resplendent in autumn colors. They ate in charming little Left Bank bistros and drank wine from the Loire Valley.

They spoke of nothing serious until one night, sitting in front of the fireplace when Monique said, "These past few weeks have been wonderful, Katherine. You've helped me to see Paris through your eyes and I thank you for that. It's been a lovely farewell to the city I love so much."

"A farewell? What do you mean?"

"I'm going home." Monique's smile was gentle. "I'm going back to Morocco, Katherine."

"To Youssef?" Katherine was stunned.

"Yes, my dear. To Youssef, if he'll have me."

"Oh, Monique, I'm so glad. If you're sure it's what you want."

"I'm sure. For the first time in twenty years I feel an absolute confidence in what I'm doing."

Katherine stared at the Frenchwoman. "What decided you?" she asked at last.

"So many things, Katherine. But more than anything else I think it was getting to know you."

"Me?" She was wide-eyed.

"I saw myself at your age, *chérie*. I saw in you all the love and doubt and fear that I felt when I first knew Youssef. I've been wrong. And forgive me, darling, but I think you've been wrong."

Tears glistened in her eyes as she took Katherine's hand. "We're cowards, Katherine. We're afraid to face how we feel. We haven't had the courage to love. It's almost too late for me, my dear, but you have your whole life ahead of you. Come back to Morocco with me, and we'll face those two lions of the desert together."

"Monique, I..." Katherine hesitated, then caught by the pleading in her friend's eyes said, "All right. Perhaps... perhaps I'll see Rashid. But I won't be pushed—this is something I'll have to decide later. For now I'd rather he didn't know I'm coming."

THE RED CITY of Marrakesh lay below.

Katherine glanced at the woman sitting beside her. Monique's face was white and tense.

"Do I look all right?" she asked for the tenth time.

"You look absolutely beautiful," Katherine reassured her. It was true, Monique looked stunning.

She had chosen a fawn-colored suit for the trip. With it she wore a ruffled blouse of pale ivory, brown high-heeled pumps and a broad-brimmed brown hat. Her hair had been styled and her nails were polished a dusty pink.

"You're going to knock Youssef's eyes out," Katherine said as they touched down.

"Stay with me every second. Oh, Katherine, now I'm afraid. Am I doing the right thing? Am I?"

"Monique, I think you'll know the answer two seconds after you see Youssef."

That's the way it was. One moment Monique was rigid with anxiety; the next moment she cried out, "Youssef!" and began running across the tarmac.

The tall white-haired man stood for a moment watching her, then he too began to run, the long brown djellaba flapping in the wind. When he reached Monique he grasped her arms and held her away from him. Then with a shout he lifted her up off the ground and held her in his arms. His face glowed with such utter delight that Katherine had to look away.

WHEN SHE WENT into the dining room, several hours later, she saw that a table had been set out on the patio.

"We're out here, daughter," Youssef called. "Monique insisted we dine

outside so that she could watch the lights of the city. Will you be warm enough?"

"After Paris this feels like summer," Katherine said. "It's wonderful to be back, Youssef. There's a special scent in the air here in Marrakesh that's unlike anything in the world." She turned to Monique. "Don't you think so, Monique? Is it as you remember it?"

"It's exactly as I remember." The Frenchwoman's smile was warm with happiness.

It was a pleasant meal and when it was over they lingered over mint tea, gazing at the gardens and the city spread out before them. But in a little while, as she had that afternoon, Katherine excused herself so that her two friends could be alone.

FROM THE CAR window the following afternoon, Katherine watched a man, dressed in a dark hooded djellaba, riding a donkey across the dry fields. How little has changed, she thought. I'm the twentieth century, in a chauffeur-driven air-conditioned car; he's the Good Samaritan riding toward Jericho.

This was such a strange country—so foreign to anything she'd ever known—and yet in less than a year she felt at home here. There was a mysticism about Morocco, a sensuous undercurrent of sights and scents that stirred her. After this journey to see Rashid she would return to her own land, but she would leave a part of herself behind.

"If you're determined to go alone," Youssef had said, "then Ahmed will drive you. But it's a long drive, daughter. If you'd let Rashid know

you're coming he'd send his plane for you. I don't see why you—"

"I'd rather do it this way, Youssef. You see, I'm liable to change my mind halfway there. I don't want Rashid to think I'm looking for a reconciliation."

Now Katherine leaned her head against the upholstered car seat and wondered if she were doing the right thing. It wouldn't do any good to tell Rashid about the child she had lost, but in a strange way she felt he had a right to know.

Because it was late and they still had a way to go, Katherine suggested they find rooms in Erfoud. It took her hours to go to sleep and she slept later than she had intended the next morning. It was almost ten when they left for the drive to Rashid's home.

Fatima came out to stand at the entrance, hands on her broad hips, frowning in puzzlement at the chauffeur who stepped out to open Katherine's door. Then, with a gasp of surprise, dark green caftan swirling around her legs, she flew down the steps.

"*Marhabán! Marhabán!*" she cried, her face alight, and went on jabbering something in Berber.

"She says, 'It is a morning of gladness, for at last you have returned,'" Ahmed said.

"It's a morning of gladness for me too," Katherine answered. "Please tell Fatima it's wonderful to see her again and ask where Rashid is."

After another exchange of rapid Berber Ahmed said, "The master went to Bouarfa very early this morning. He'll return tonight. Fatima says she will have lunch prepared and that later you must rest from your trip."

"*Shukrán*," Katherine said, then followed the Berber woman down the corridor to her old room.

Nothing had changed; it was as though she'd never left. The caftans were there and so were the rows of jeweled slippers.

That evening she bathed, then brushed her hair back and let it flow free. She dressed in a pale blue and silver caftan and matching slippers.

Just as she stepped out of her room she heard the crunch of tires in the driveway.

Slowly, feeling as though she'd never breathe properly again, Katherine went down the corridor to the front entrance. She could hear Rashid's voice, then Fatima's excited shrill of news.

He looked up then and saw Katherine. For a long and breathless moment neither of them spoke.

I could get lost in the desert darkness of his eyes, she thought. And she was lost, unable to speak or move until he said, "Hello, Katherine. This is a surprise."

She glided down the steps. "Hello, Rashid. I hope my visit isn't inconvenient."

"Of course not. How long can you stay?"

"Two or three days if that's all right. I have a reservation to fly out of Casablanca next week."

"I see." His face looked pinched with tension. The strain between them was so taut the air felt rigid.

"If you'll excuse me I'll get cleaned up for dinner," he said.

THEY SAT AT opposite ends of the long dining table and made polite conversation.

Youssef was well. He was delighted that Monique was with him. She, Katherine, had been staying with Monique in Paris for the past month and a half. Yes, Rashid's grandmother was charming. Yes, they'd been to the Louvre.

Katherine pushed the food around on her plate, trying to disguise the fact that she wasn't eating, only too aware that Rashid was doing the same thing.

His face looked so cold. She wanted him to reach out and touch her. She wanted...

"Would you care to walk in the garden?" Rashid asked when the dishes had been cleared away.

"No, I...I think I'll go to my room. I have a bit of a headache."

"Very well: Let Fatima know if you need anything."

"Yes, I will. Thank you."

"I hope you sleep well."

She looked at him and felt the threat of tears behind her eyelids. "Good night," she murmured.

Once in her room she allowed the tears to fall. Had she been wrong to come, wrong to want to tell him about the baby? She closed her eyes. She'd go back to Marrakesh in a few days. Then home to Maine from Casablanca. In time all of this would fade, as all dreams must.

She selected a nightgown the color of golden sand. Then she went out to stand on the balcony overlooking the gardens. In the distance she could hear the tinkle of bells and knew that the water seller was making his rounds. The sky was ink-dark blue. A million stars glimmered.

Katherine leaned on the railing, gazing out at the shadowy mountains in the distance. Below her she heard a

sound and when she looked she saw Rashid. Through the half darkness they stared at each other. Then Katherine turned and went back into her room.

She got into bed, feeling the coolness of the satin sheets against her skin. With a shivery sigh she reached to turn out the bedside light, then froze, as Rashid threw open the door.

"What do you want?" she whispered.

"What do you think I've wanted since that first moment I saw you there on the stairs?"

He crossed the room in two strides and before she could speak he gathered her in his arms.

"It's been so long, Katherine," he said. "So long."

"Rashid, please. I don't think we should—"

"No. Don't say anything. I don't care why you've come, or when you're going to leave. I don't want to talk about anything."

His kiss told of hunger and desire too long unfulfilled. He devoured her lips, gently forcing them apart so that he could sample the warm recesses of her mouth. He touched her with questing eagerness, as though he were memorizing every inch of her. With trembling fingers he traced the line of her throat before he moved to each breast.

"Sit up, Katherine," he whispered.

When he had eased the sand-colored gown over her head he put a hand on her shoulder, forcing her back against the pillows as he pulled the sheet away from her body.

His eyes were hungry as he gazed down at her. Quickly he tore the white djellaba over his head and stood be-

fore her, naked and magnificent, his lean bronze body smoothly muscled. His dark desert eyes burned into hers.

When he lay down beside her he gathered her into his arms. His mouth sought hers again, more gently this time as he drew her closer.

She thought she'd forgotten the warmth and texture of him, the smell of the desert on his skin. But she'd been wrong; she'd never forget it. She ran her fingers over his body. Everything, every line and curve and hollow was as she remembered.

Neck arched back against the satin pillow, Katherine moaned with delight as he trailed a line of kisses down her throat to the hollow of her shoulder. As he drew closer to her breasts she tensed with anticipation.

There was a slow warm flick of his tongue and she gasped with pleasure, then whispered his name as he captured one rigid rosy peak.

Let it go on forever, she thought as she gave herself up to the sweetly tantalizing tongue. "It's been so long," she whispered brokenly as she urged his body closer. "Come up over me, Rashid." Her breath came in ragged gasps. "Please, darling, now. Now."

Burning with longing, her fingers tightened in his thick black hair as she forced his face to hers for a kiss that told him more plainly than words all that she felt. He raised his body over hers and clasped her to him.

When he moved against her, whispering her name in the wheat tangle of her hair, she lifted her body to his. Again and again he found her mouth as his movements quickened and his hands tightened on her body.

Because she knew it would end soon and she could not bear to have it fin-

ish, Katherine tried to hold back. He sensed it in the slight withdrawing of her body and slowed his movements, leaning to flick her breast with his tongue. Then it was too much for both of them and their movements quickened, carrying them higher and higher on their sweet flight to ecstasy, up into a whirling galaxy of endless splendor.

Finally, mouths and bodies pressed close, they floated down to quiet reality.

IT WAS A LONG TIME before either of them spoke. At last Rashid moved slightly away from her and, smoothing her tangled hair, said, "How can you deny what is between us, my love?"

"I don't deny it," Katherine said. "But..."

Gently Rashid placed a finger against her lips, silencing her. "I know I'm not an easy man, Katherine. I know there will be problems. But if we both try..." He looked down at her. "I won't ask you to cover your beautiful face with a veil or do anything you don't want to do."

He kissed her trembling lips. "We're different people, with different customs and ideas, Katherine, but we can learn to listen to each other with our hearts. I love you—you're my reason for living. I don't think I can exist without you."

"Darling," she whispered.

"I want to marry you, Katherine, to spend my life with you." His face was freed of all tension now, his eyes warm with a love he no longer needed to hide. "Now tell me what brought you back," he said.

This was the moment Katherine had dreaded. "There's something I have to tell you," she said at last, raising her eyes to look at him. "Perhaps it doesn't matter now, but I think... I have to tell you."

"What is it, sweetheart?"

She moved slightly out of the circle of his arms. "I was pregnant when I left here, Rashid."

"What?" Hands gripped her arms like vises. "What are you talking about?"

"I was pregnant. I should have known but I didn't."

"When did you find out?"

"When I got to Madrid."

"Why didn't you return?" Suddenly he froze. "You said you *were* pregnant."

"Yes."

"You didn't want our baby." The painful words were torn from his throat.

"I did. Oh, Rashid, I did. But I miscarried," she cried out, but he strode away. "I wanted our baby." She wept. "I wanted it."

Katherine lay still, staring up at the ceiling. It was over, she knew that now. He was so angry—he'd never forgive her.

He stood with his back to her and pulled the white djellaba on. Then he went out onto the balcony.

Katherine got up. She slipped into a robe and followed him. I'll go home, she thought. There's nothing to keep me here now. Quickly, she said, "I'm so sorry. I was wrong to tell you about the baby. Please believe that I didn't do it to hurt you."

"My God," he said, "how you must hate me."

She put her hand on his shoulder. "I don't hate you. I know it's over between us, but you have to know, Rashid—you must know that I love you. Rashid? Won't you look at me?"

He turned and she saw the tears.

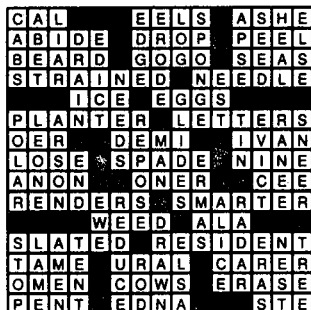
"Why didn't you tell me when it happened?" he choked out. "Did you hate me so much that you wouldn't even let me share your pain?"

"Rashid, no!" She touched his face, soothing the tears away. "Oh, Rashid," she whispered.

They held each other for a long time. Then finally she said, "We'll have other babies. I'll even wear a veil once in a while if it will make you happy."

His body trembled with reaction as he kissed her. "Never leave me," he said. "Promise me, Katherine."

"I promise." She looked out at the distant mountains, the sand dunes and the swaying palms. Her arms tightened around him. "I promise," she said again.






STEPHANIE JAMES

Corporate Affair



Under Kalinda Brady's cool silk surface was a smoldering heart waiting to be set afire. But the beautiful tycoon hadn't expected the sparks to fly with Rand Alastair—the stranger whose caresses left her yearning for more....



It was the sound of his voice that first caught her attention, tugged at her awareness.

The name of the little store was the Mountain Gallery and Kalinda Brady had made three trips to it this morning before the owners had seen fit to finally open its doors to potential customers.

"I'm out back! Yell if there's anything you want!"

She moved across the sunlit floor with an easy, confident stride. At twenty-nine and with the recent success she'd had at taking over the reins of her father's firm in Denver, Kalinda didn't normally lack confidence.

Kalinda had worked hard for that success and it annoyed her when others didn't work hard as well. There was a look of mild disapproval in her eyes as she came to a halt on the threshold of the back door.

"You're supposed to compliment me on the nice catch," the shop's owner informed her politely, hazel eyes laughing at her expression. "Not look at me as if I were an ax murderer!"

In spite of herself, Kalinda grinned in response. "Those poor fish are, I presume, the reason you're three hours late opening the shop?"

"If I'd known I had such an eager customer waiting I would have hurried," he drawled, the knife in his hand going to work on the fish in front of him.

Her curious gaze rested on the bent head of the man in front of her, not-

ing the dark fire in the thick, chestnut hair which was carelessly combed and a little long for her taste. The hazel eyes were deep-set and flickered with intelligence when he glanced up and caught her watching him. He must have been around thirty-seven or thirty-eight, she reflected absently. She sensed a latent male power in him and wondered how he could have been content to waste his life running a part-time gallery and fishing when the urge took him.

"I wanted to ask about that watercolor of the lake hanging in the window," Kalinda told him politely.

"You like it?" he inquired interestedly, pausing in his work. He laughed, a rich, full-bodied laughter that filled the yard. "Give me a chance to wash the evidence off my hands and I'll come inside and take your money. My name's Rand Alastair, by the way. What's yours?"

She blinked, surprised at the straightforward question. "Kalinda. Kalinda Brady."

He nodded. "On vacation?"

"Not exactly," she replied unthinkingly and then wished she'd held her tongue.

"Business?"

"It's a personal matter," she replied, letting her annoyance show.

"I see. Are you here by yourself?"

"I don't think that's any of your business," she told him, knowing any one of her employees would have immediately backed off after hearing that tone of voice.

To her surprise, Rand had the grace to wince. "Sorry, I still do that once in a while." He led her back into the gallery. "Want a cold beer? It's going to get warm this afternoon."

She started to decline but Rand popped the tops on both cans before Kalinda could think of a polite excuse.

She peered down at the can skeptically.

"Think of it as getting back to basics," he murmured and took a long, satisfying swallow. "Now let's see, I've got that price list here somewhere..."

Beer in hand, Rand rummaged around in the drawers behind the counter, eventually producing a scrap of paper with a triumphant air. "I knew it was here!"

"Congratulations," Kalinda couldn't resist saying.

He ignored the comment and gave her the price of the painting.

It was a bit higher than Kalinda had expected and she glanced around to take another look at the watercolor landscape. As she did a pottery bowl caught her eye.

"Oh, I like that!" It fit nicely in her hands and the earthen colors were perfect for her dining room. "I'll take this, too," she said easily, digging out her checkbook. "Perhaps you could put paper around them?"

"Finish your beer first. Unless someone's waiting for you?" he added innocently.

"Well, no, but..." Too late she realized she'd just answered his earlier question about whether or not she was in town alone. She met his laughing eyes.

"Come on outside and sit under a tree while I finish cleaning the fish."

"Mr. Alastair—" Kalinda began firmly.

"Be nice," he pleaded with a beguiling smile that weakened her. "Everyone likes to show off a good catch. Besides I can tell by looking at you that you're bored and restless."

"Is it that obvious?" she groaned, following him back out into the yard.

The light, easy conversation that followed proved a tonic for her.

"So, what do you do in Denver?" Rand inquired casually at one point.

"I run a company called Brady Data Processing," she admitted mildly.

"I've heard of it," he astonished her by acknowledging calmly. "You're in charge?"

"I was elected chief executive officer a couple of years ago after my father was killed in a plane crash. The board of directors was used to having a Brady at the helm." She shrugged.

He swung around. "What are you doing here in our little burg, Kalinda Brady?"

"I think you already asked me that," she retorted. She stood up and tossed the beer can into a nearby container. "I think it's time I was on my way. If you'll wrap the painting and the pottery, I'll—"

"I'll have them ready this evening," he drawled smoothly as he finished with the fish. "When you help me eat the evidence of my murder spree. You've already admitted you're bored," he coaxed.

It wasn't until she had left the shop to return to her motel that Kalinda wondered which of them was intent on fighting off a boring evening. Could it be that Rand Alastair was a little rest-

less, too? But that didn't make any sense. He had obviously chosen of his own accord to live in this out-of-the-way town. And he clearly enjoyed his fishing. Well, it wasn't her problem. She had one of her own to worry about!

WHEN SHE OPENED the door to him a little before six, the white Lotus behind him in the parking lot took Kalinda aback.

"It was either this or the motorcycle." He grinned engagingly as he slipped her into the cockpit of the low-slung sports car. The gallery must be doing better than it looked, she decided. But that didn't make any sense....

"Why do I have this feeling that I'm turning out to be a source of amusement for you?" Rand asked later as he pan-fried the fresh trout over the open flame of a barbecue pit.

"Don't you want me to enjoy myself?" Kalinda retorted, as she reclined on the outdoor lounge. The glass-walled house with its elegant, rustic lines had been another surprise to her. Kalinda gave him a slow, teasing smile. "Are you artistic types always so sensitive?"

He grinned, a slashing, faintly predatory expression. "Tell me, did you accept my offer of dinner because I represent a change of pace from your usual run of admirers?"

"Isn't that what a vacation is for? A change of pace?" she chuckled, enjoying the banter.

"I knew it," he groaned dramatically. "I'm fated to be a vacation fling!"

"Don't worry." Kalinda smiled. "Giving me dinner doesn't exactly put you into the category of a fling."

"Good," he said smoothly. "Because we artistic types prefer to think in terms of *affairs*, not flings."

Kalinda's gray eyes went a little cold. "I'm afraid having dinner is not a prelude to an affair, either."

Rand watched her curiously for a moment, raising his wineglass for a sip. "You don't like the idea of being the mistress of an artist-fisherman?"

"Not particularly." The haughty tone was cool.

"But all artists have mistresses. It's part of the mystique," he explained.

"Perhaps you can consider our association as a change of pace for yourself, then," she suggested deliberately.

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed humbly. "It's a pity though. I've been weaving artistic fantasies since I looked up and saw you scowling at me in the shop." He grinned, reaching for plates on which to dish up the fish.

"Are you an artist?" she questioned.

"I dabble," he admitted. "I did the pottery piece you bought this afternoon."

"You did! Why didn't you say something? It's lovely." Kalinda declared, going to work on the trout.

He smiled, looking quite pleased with himself. "I'll show you some of the other pieces I've done after dinner."

She met his glance. A short, potent silence hung between them for an instant as they looked at each other. Kalinda found herself swallowing with a twinge of uncertainty. What was wrong with her? Why this new rest-

lessness which had begun to replace the nervousness she'd been experiencing over her plans for the coming weekend. The confrontation with David Hutton still awaited her. It should be the uppermost concern in her mind.

Irritably she gave a mental shrug. "The trout is delicious."

They lingered over dinner as the waning summer sun settled behind the mountain, casting the lake and its surroundings into shadows.

LATER, Rand Alastair displayed his pottery with an unaffected pleasure. Kalinda went from piece to piece, genuinely admiring the warm colors, rich glazes, and original design.

"You're very talented," she remarked, wondering privately how he could possibly make such a good living off the pottery and the gallery.

She turned around to face him and found herself bumping softly against his chest. His arms were around her even as she opened her lips to apologize.

"I've been looking for an excuse to kiss you all evening..."

Kalinda saw the lambent flame flare in the clear hazel gaze above her.

His kiss was a warm, probing caress that grew around her, enveloping her senses. His lips moved on hers, forcing a dampening, electric contact that denied any attempt at retreat on her part.

Kalinda grew a little shocked at her own response. This wasn't like her, as any of her recent escorts could have testified! Even with David it hadn't been this sudden, this overwhelming....

Rand's fingers dipped lower, shaping the curve of her waist, pressing

with growing urgency into the flare of her hips. He pulled her abruptly closer, nestling her into the cradle of his thighs. Kalinda sucked in her breath on a low moan of surprise mingled with dismay.

"We've been building toward this from the moment we met," he whispered.

Her own appallingly swift reaction alarmed her. The moment she'd felt his arms go around her she'd known a strange kind of longing. And that was definitely *not* normal for her!

Rand lifted one hand and slipped off the small, gold earring she wore in her left ear. He dropped the earring into his pocket as his teeth closed teasingly, temptingly where the piece of jewelry had been.

It was a small, seemingly insignificant action, yet when he repeated it with the other ear, Kalinda began to feel as if he were stripping her of her very clothing. The shiver that shook Kalinda was almost frightening in its intensity.

He moved, sweeping her up into his arms, and strode across the cream carpet to the long caramel couch, settling her gently down on it. When Kalinda opened her eyes she found him nipping her bare shoulder with his teeth and then soothing the scented area with his tongue.

The soft material of the dress began to fall away from her and Kalinda realized dimly he had found the delicate fastenings. She knew she ought to stop him but she couldn't seem to say the words.

It wasn't until she felt him part her legs with his own that some semblance of rational thought returned.

"Rand... Rand, please. That's enough! I never meant..." Kalinda moved her head restlessly on the cushion. She began to push against his shoulders.

"Kalinda!" His desire-deepened voice cracked slightly as he lifted his head to stare down at her. "You want this as much as I do!"

She shook her head in denial.

For an instant the hazel eyes flashed.

"You're serious, aren't you?" Rand muttered dryly.

"It's time I went back to the motel."

"I'll take you back if that's what you really want..."

"It is!"

"On one condition," he concluded a little too gently. "That I can see you tomorrow."

Kalinda grabbed a deep breath. "I won't feel any differently tomorrow!"

"How can you be sure of that?"

"I know what I want and what I don't want."

He hesitated and then said with unexpected coolness, "You do seem like the sort of woman who makes up her own mind and does what she wishes most of the time. So what are you doing here? It's obvious you're bored and you're not the sort who likes to head for a rustic environment when you feel like getting away from it all."

"My reasons for being here are personal," she muttered with all the arrogance she could command. "Will you please let me up?"

"If you'll grant my condition," he finally agreed with a short nod.

She sighed. "I'll have lunch with you tomorrow." At least he was off the other topic!

SHE SHOULD have known he wouldn't give up trying to seduce her that easily, Kalinda told herself the next day as she lounged beside him on a picnic blanket by the lake. His delicate probing was going to send her over the edge. The lunch had been enjoyable but it hadn't taken her long to realize Rand was hot on the trail he had scented last night.

"You're not sure exactly how many days you'll be here?" Rand asked.

"I expect I'll be leaving the day after tomorrow. Now, if you don't mind, I'd rather talk about something else."

"My plans for us tomorrow night?" he suggested.

Her laughter died at once. "I'm afraid that's out of the question, Rand."

He went very still beside her. "Tonight's our last evening together?" he asked quietly.

"Yes."

"But you'll be here in town tomorrow night?"

She said nothing.

"So that's it," he growled softly. "You're here to meet a man." The words dropped like stones out on the lake.

Kalinda didn't move. "It's business," she finally said. "Personal, private business."

"You're not looking for a fling with me because you're here to have an affair with another man?"

She flinched, pulling her eyes away from his condemning glare. "I'm not here to have an affair with anyone," she muttered. She couldn't meet his eyes.

"But you're meeting a man tomorrow night?" he prodded. He sat up, reaching out to catch her chin and

force her around to face him. "Who is this man?"

"My ex-fiancé." The words sounded stark, even to her own ears. "He dropped me two years ago when my father was killed and it was discovered the firm was in bad shape. David Hutton, it turned out, was marrying me because he wanted my father's company."

"And now he wants you back?"

Kalinda smiled grimly.

"Why here? Why not Denver?"

"Oh, we couldn't do that," she explained acidly. "David's married now, you see."

"You little fool," he breathed.

"I'm going to let David Hutton beg me for another chance, listen to him offer to divorce his wife, and then I'm going to laugh and tell him exactly what I think of him! The one thing David can't stand is to be laughed at."

Rand stared at her for a long, taut moment, his expression hard and unreadable.

"You can't go through with it," he finally said flatly. "It's too damn dangerous."

"Dangerous!" Kalinda almost smiled at that. "David's not the physical type. He wouldn't..."

"You've already misjudged him once, haven't you?"

She winced at his pointed comment. "I know him for what he is. I learned everything I needed to know about the man when he came to me after my father's funeral and said he was breaking off the engagement."

"All you learned at that point was that he was no longer interested in you or the company when its financial status had been revealed."

She frowned.

"Are you sure revenge is the real reason you're planning this?" he growled. "Maybe you're really here to see if you can pick up the pieces..."

"That's absurd," she scoffed.

Rand regarded her probingly, as if he were trying to get to the bottom of a serious mystery. "Brady Data Processing, I take it, is no longer on the skids?" he murmured dryly.

"No, it's not." That remark brought an unconscious smile of satisfaction to Kalinda's lips. "We've shown profits for the last three quarters."

One chestnut eyebrow lifted in acknowledgment of the accomplishment. "You must have worked hard during the past two years."

"I did," she admitted simply.

"In order to forget Hutton?" he demanded.

"It had nothing to do with David."

"So now you've got the company back on its feet and David Hutton is trying to slip back into your life. Doesn't that strike you as something of a coincidence?"

Kalinda stared at him and then shook her head firmly. "David is thoroughly involved with his own firm. Why should he be interested in Brady Data Processing now?"

There was a lengthy silence from Rand's side of the picnic blanket.

"Simple greed?" he finally suggested caustically.

"Well, what you've just suggested only makes me more determined than ever to go through with my plan. If I'm right I'll have the satisfaction of denying him me. If you're right, I'll have the satisfaction of denying him the firm!"

"Neither of which is an adequate reason for taking the risk of seeing him

again, dammit! What's the matter? Hasn't there been any other man in the past two years who could take your mind off him?"

Kalinda gave him a startled, too-revealing glance and he nodded in grim satisfaction. "So that's it. He's the last man you were serious about. You've spent the past two years devoting your energies to your firm and you haven't had time for a proper, flaming romance which might have dimmed the memory of your ex-fiancé!"

"That's crazy!" she hissed.

"What you need is someone to replace the memories with a much more interesting reality." Rand reached for her as Kalinda, seeing the flicker of intent in his eyes, started to edge away.

"Rand, don't..."

"Give me one night, Kalinda," he grated, his hands on her shoulders.

"Just one night..."

"Why, you egotistical fool! I have no intention of being a one-night stand for you, dammit!"

"And I have no intention of letting you be a one-night stand for your ex-fiancé!"

"How many times do I have to tell you, that's not the way it's going to be. I know what I'm doing!"

"The hell you do! You're so blinded by your memories of that bastard you can't see the stupidity of your own plans! If you ran Brady Data Processing with that degree of insanity, you would have lost it to bankruptcy long ago!"

"What do you know about running a company?" she gritted tersely. "Don't talk to me about how to run my life or my business. We live in two separate worlds and you aren't in any position to give me advice!" She

leaped to her feet, frantically trying not to cry. She desperately wished she could figure out why this man had such an incredible effect on her. It made no sense at all!

He stood up beside her with a quick grace and caught her wrist.

"Kalinda, I'm sorry," he muttered.

"But it's so damn frustrating..."

"A man your age must know how to handle a little masculine frustration by now!"

"I'm not talking about the way you just frustrated me physically," he rasped. "I'm talking about how frustrating it is to try to make you see reason." His voice lowered gruffly, persuasively. "Please give me a chance to make you change your mind. I meant what I said a little while ago. Give me one night."

"Your ego is as vast as David's!"

Rand stained the tanned heights of his cheekbones. Impulsively Kalinda lifted her hand to touch the side of his face with a placating gesture, her eyes soft and apologetic.

"That," he finally said, "was a rather low blow!"

She winced. "I know. I'm sorry."

He searched her face a moment longer and then appeared to relax slightly. "I suppose it must sound like sheer male ego talking when I tell you all I need is one night to put that man out of your head forever."

His mouth twisted wryly. Rand raised his free hand and wrapped it around her neck under the fall of brown-blond hair. Kalinda felt him lightly massaging her nape and against her will her knees seemed to weaken. She didn't understand his effect on her but she knew it was dangerous. Far more dangerous than any risks she

might be running in her plot to get revenge on David.

"Rand, we aren't meant for each other," Kalinda said sadly. "Can't you understand that?"

"You're a high-powered executive," he said with a knowing look. "I'm a lazy, good-for-nothing, skibum-fisherman who sells a few artsy-craftsy things on the side to keep the wolf from the door."

Kalinda thought about the white Lotus and the expensively furnished home by the lake but refrained from inquiring as to the source of those things. She didn't want to know which rich lady tourist had paid for the Lotus last winter!

"Rand, please. Let's just say we should never have let ourselves get carried away on the basis of physical attraction."

"Well, at least you're admitting we've got that much going for us!" He stared at her for a second and then grinned. "Please, Kalinda. Have dinner with me tonight. I swear I won't drag you off to bed."

"We'll only spend the time arguing over what I'm going to do tomorrow night," she protested.

"Have you got anything better to do than argue with me?" he murmured, his fingers on her nape moving lightly, seductively. "Think of it as an opportunity to convince me you know what you're doing."

*

RAND WAS a man of his word, Kalinda decided much later that night as she grimly closed her motel room door. It had been one line of reasoning after another, one argument after another,

one persuasive attack on her logic after another. She felt utterly exhausted.

He had amazed her with his strategy, leaping nimbly from one point to the next in his efforts to convince her she was making a mistake in trying for revenge on David Hutton.

And, in spite of his hints to the contrary, Rand had not resorted again to seduction. Kalinda shook her head wryly. Instead, he had fed her well, spent several hours intently "discussing" the matter at hand, and then he'd left her on her doorstep with the most singly devastating comment of the evening.

"Ask yourself," he'd ordered softly as he'd opened her door for her, "why you're even bothering to listen to me in the first place. Face it, Kalinda, you want to be talked out of this fiasco. That's the reason you told me the truth this afternoon, isn't it?"

He hadn't waited for her crushing retort. Instead, he'd vaulted easily down the steps, slid into the Lotus and disappeared, leaving Kalinda behind to face a serious attack of self-honesty.

Rand probably should have been a prose-cutting attorney instead of a part-time arts and crafts dealer!

Kalinda lay staring at the ceiling for a long time, trying to recall the hurt and humiliation that had come in the wake of her father's tragic death. But it was difficult tonight to resurrect those old feelings. The habit of wanting revenge had made her jump at the opportunity of paying back David Hutton. Now, a combination of her conscience and the relentless arguments of a man she had only known for two days seemed to have succeeded in killing even the habit of wanting revenge.

She made up her mind about what to do in the morning and went very soundly to sleep.

SOMEHOW Kalinda wasn't altogether surprised to find herself guiding the silver rental car along the narrow lake-side road toward Rand's home the next morning. She would only stop long enough to say goodbye, she told herself. He deserved to know his arguments had been effective.

The morning sunlight was coming through the pines as she knocked tentatively on the door.

Whatever Kalinda had planned to say was squelched by the sight of him standing on the threshold staring at her. He looked terrible! The hazel eyes were dark and strained and there was a desperate tired, haggard look about him.

His eyes flared to life with a deep, hungry gleam as he reached for her.

"You changed your mind about meeting Hutton tonight at the motel," he stated evenly, his fingers sliding around her neck while his thumbs went under her jaw to hold her face so that she could not look away.

"Yes," she said simply. "I phoned him this morning."

"It's about time you got here," he whispered thickly, pulling her gently, inexorably toward him. "I've spent most of the night walking the floor over you, Kalinda Brady."

His mouth closed fiercely over hers, the tip of his probing tongue flicking across her lips and ultimately claiming the inner warmth of her mouth. His fingers found the line of her spine and tracked upward, sending out little eddies of sensuous current at every point along the way.

"Suddenly I feel fantastic," Rand growled as she played her fingers across the muscles of his back, her hands moving under the white shirt.

"Oh, Rand," she breathed.

He trembled beneath her touch and Kalinda was thrilled to be able to arouse him as he aroused her. It was crazy and it could only happen between them once, but she was twenty-nine years old and she was suddenly determined to sample the depths of true desire.

"Kalinda, Kalinda, I want you so much," he rasped and swung her high into his arms. Kalinda pressed her lips to his shoulder and closed her eyes as he strode down the cream-carpeted hall to a bedroom full of caramels and browns.

Rand settled her gently on the sun-dappled bed, her light-colored hair fanning out across the rich golden brown bedspread. For a moment he stood gazing down at her and then he sat beside her, his eyes roaming warmly over her as he slowly undressed her. Then he stroked his fingers in languid, delicious little circles along the length of her.

Kalinda was trembling with desire. She reached down to touch him with intimate wonder.

"Oh, Rand! I've never known this kind of... of *aching*!"

"I'm going to make you mine this morning, Kalinda Brady. I have to!"

She saw the smoldering fire in his eyes as he raised himself with sudden intention and her own whirling senses spun chaotically out of control. She reached up to cling to him and draw him down to her.

"Please," she whimpered. "I need you!"

His hands gripped her shoulders and his body surged passionately against hers, claiming it utterly and completely. Instinctively she sought to envelope his strength, make him a part of her.

They seemed to merge into one being. Kalinda could only gasp with wonder and desire. No man had ever beckoned to her deepest needs with the irresistible lure of such honest and overwhelming male hunger. It was primitive and it was real, yet it was astonishingly tender at times. It cut through all the layers of civilization and sophistication.

She cried out as the threshold was reached, her body shivering with a sudden convulsive energy she'd never known before. It arched her throat, tautened every muscle in her and brought a mind-spinning sense of release.

Above her she heard the harsh, muffled shout of satisfaction and male triumph as Rand followed her over the magic threshold, wrapping her tightly to him in preparation for the long, languid descent on the other side.

"Kalinda, my sweet Kalinda," he breathed over and over again as the sunlight played across their damp, naked bodies.

She turned against him, lifting her eyes to meet the surprisingly vulnerable expression in his own.

"You had me so damn scared," he admitted wryly, leaning back against the pillows to stare intently at the ceiling.

"Somehow I can't envision you scared of anything," she retorted lightly.

"You should have seen me at four this morning. How did David take it when you told him this morning?"

Kalinda lifted one bare shoulder dismissingly. "He wasn't very pleased. I gave him all the logical reasons why we shouldn't meet. His wife, our reputations. I tried to make it sound as if two reasonable people should agree to call the whole thing off before it got started."

"Did he buy it?" There was a wary look in the hazel eyes as they narrowed slightly.

"He kept trying to talk me into staying here until he could arrive and change my mind," she confessed. "I finally got fed up and told him the truth, that I had agreed to the weekend in the first place because I wanted a little revenge for the way he'd treated me two years ago. Then I told him not to call me again and hung up the phone."

"Hmm."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded, mouth curving at his skeptical tone.

"Forget it, honey. We'll talk about it later." He yawned extravagantly. "You wore me out."

He looked so sleepy that Kalinda found herself smiling with a tenderness she'd never felt toward a man. Almost lovingly she stroked the angled plane of his cheek.

"We've got a lot to discuss," he murmured, already half-asleep.

Kalinda felt the moisture behind her lashes and blinked it away determinedly. She waited until she felt his hold on her loosen and knew for certain he was making up for the sleep he'd missed the previous night.

Then, aware there could be only one ending for this kind of passionate interlude, she slowly rose from the caramel bedspread and began to dress.

*

KALINDA stood at the window of her office in downtown Denver and looked out across the Mile-High City with remote eyes. How long did it take to recover from a weekend fling? she asked herself for the thousandth time. She stared at the report in front of her and told herself she was going to put Rand Alastair out of her head. She should be worrying about the cocktail party she was giving that evening.

The intercom chimed softly on her desk.

"Yes, George?" she said absently into the speaker.

"There's a call from Mr. David Hutton, Miss Brady. Will you take it?" George Barrett hesitated. He knew she was routinely refusing calls from David Hutton. "I don't believe this call is of a personal nature," he finally announced.

Kalinda sighed in resignation. "Okay, put him through."

"It's about time you took my call," David drawled. "That damn secretary of yours has been putting me off for two days!"

"On my instructions. Will you please state your business and get off the line?"

"You should have met me at that motel, Kalinda. Things could have been handled a lot more pleasantly if you had."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"A merger, Kalinda. You've done some astonishing things with Brady

Data Processing. I want the company."

Kalinda swallowed in shock and outrage. "Out of the question."

"You aren't going to have any choice. I'm filing forms with the Securities and Exchange Commission this week."

"What!" Kalinda stared at the phone.

"That's right, love," he taunted with pleased satisfaction. "I would have preferred a friendly sort of takeover but I don't mind a fight. I'll have to offer premium price for your stock, but it will be worth it in the end."

Kalinda felt panic begin to rise in her. After all her work in getting Brady Data Processing back on its feet! She couldn't bear the thought of having it forcibly taken from her.

"Why are you doing this, David?" she asked coldly.

"The usual reasons," he retorted bluntly. "My firm is heavy in cash right now and we need some acquisitions." He chuckled arrogantly. "It will give me great personal satisfaction to take Brady Data Processing. Now that you've done all the hard work..."

"I've got news for you, David. We'll fight."

"It will only make the process that much more interesting. Perhaps somewhere along the line you'll even consider that little mountain rendezvous we planned. I wonder how many chief executive officers of firms facing a hostile merger have tried to buy off the raiding company with their bodies? Interesting thought, isn't it?"

Kalinda slammed the phone down, his confident, knowing laughter ringing in her ears.

She sat in stunned silence for several minutes. My God, she thought dazedly. She had been so swamped just trying to save the business it had never occurred to her that someone would come along and take the salvaged prize right out of her hands.

SEVERAL HOURS later Kalinda paused in her duties as hostess to take stock of the cocktail party's success. There were several important business associates here this evening. She needed to talk to someone, she thought. Someone who knew about the dirty in-fighting that went on in a hostile merger situation. It was a cinch she wouldn't get much constructive help from her own staff. They'd never encountered such a maneuver.

Before she could decide if there was someone in the crowd who could be potentially helpful, Kalinda was interrupted by a knock at the door.

Kalinda frowned, unable to think of anyone still unaccounted for. She crossed the lush green carpet, skirting a chatting cluster of guests and reached for the doorknob, an automatic smile on her face as she opened it.

The polite words of welcome died in her throat as the light spilled over the figure in her doorway. Chestnut hair gleamed from a recent shower—chestnut hair that had been trimmed and carefully combed since she'd seen it last. The light-colored suit looked hand-tailored and was complemented by a satin bow tie. The crisp white shirt was understated and elegant.

"Rand," she whispered finally. "What are you doing here?"

"That's obvious, isn't it?" he murmured, hazel eyes regarding her with

an intent, considering expression. "I'm here to rescue you."

"Rescue me?" She stared up at him, dumbfounded.

"Honey," he murmured softly, putting both hands lightly on her shoulders and pulling her close long enough to drop a warm, hungry kiss on her astonished, parted lips. "If you don't even know yet that you need rescuing, you're in worse trouble than I thought! Now move out of the doorway, sweetheart, and let your knight in shining armor inside."

Unable to think of anything else to do, Kalinda did as instructed.

"Got anything to eat?" Rand went on easily, taking in the crowded room with a single, sweeping glance. "I'm starved."

"Over there," she admitted, gesturing toward the long white table in front of the mirrored wall.

He put a proprietary hand on her lower back and urged her forward. "Stop looking like a cornered kitten. I'm friendly, remember? Although why I should be after waking up and finding you'd run off..."

"I'd rather we didn't discuss that," she began stiffly.

"You want to discuss the rescue of Brady Data Processing from the grasping talons of a corporate raider?" Rand reached for a salmon and cucumber canapé.

Kalinda stared at him, open-mouthed. "How in the world did you know about that?" she breathed.

"When you told me a little about the history of your firm and Hutton's newly aroused interest in you, I got suspicious. Monday I did some checking. There's always someone in a com-

pany who will talk. I got hold of one of Hutton's vice presidents."

"Just like that?" she demanded.

"Just like that."

"You'll excuse me if I seem to be having a hard time taking all this in," she snapped, growing a little irritated over his complacency. "Rand what do you know about all this? What do you mean by 'rescuing me'? How is it you know what to do?" she almost wailed.

He stopped munching for a moment and eyed her thoughtfully. Then he swallowed politely and a slow smile shaped his mouth.

"All it takes is total ruthlessness, an instinct for making war, and a willingness to stop at nothing."

Kalinda's eyes widened as she momentarily sensed a menace in him she hadn't dreamed existed. An instant later she shook her head, telling herself she was mistaken.

He nodded, the hardness in him fading away as he turned to reach for another interesting tidbit. "I think I've still got the old shark instincts and talents."

Kalinda heard the wry satisfaction in his words and blinked, confused more than ever. "You sound proud of it!"

The grin faded into a self-mocking grimace. "No, I'm not proud of it. But it is a useful business skill, I'm sorry to say. I just wanted you to have a small demonstration so you can introduce me to you—"

"Introduce you as what?" she gritted.

"The outside consultant you've hired to direct the defenses of Brady Data Processing," he retorted easily. "By the way, you shouldn't have run away that morning after we made love, sweetheart," he went on, his dark voice

turning slightly husky. "Although I understand why you did."

Kalinda flicked an uneasy glance up through her lashes. "You do?"

"Of course. You thought there was no future for us, didn't you? You thought I was an unmotivated, unambitious, undynamic wastrel who had no further goal in life except to fish and seduce bored tourists!"

Kalinda could no longer meet his eyes. "I'm here to prove myself to you, sweetheart. And your ex-fiancé has put the tool I need right into my hands. You admire successful, dynamic, aggressive businessmen? Don't worry, Kalinda, you won't have to be ashamed of our affair. You'll be giving yourself to a man who can out-shark anyone in the business world!"

She was desperately trying to concoct a suitable response when Harold Sebastian emerged from the crowd.

"Kalinda, my dear, you must introduce me to your new guest." Tall, stately, and silver-haired, Harold beamed complacently down at her. His long association with her father had given him a decidedly paternalistic air toward her. It was an attitude Kalinda encountered from many of the long-time employees of the firm. They considered themselves honorary uncles and aunts.

"I'm afraid my arrival was something of a surprise for Kalinda," Rand said smoothly, thrusting out a polite hand. "I'm Rand Alastair."

"Harold Sebastian," Harold said genially. "Alastair," he repeated with a thoughtful look. "That name sounds familiar."

"The name is going to sound a lot more familiar in the future. I'm going to be working for Kalinda."

Kalinda froze as Harold's inquiring, interested gaze switched to her. "I see. In what capacity?"

"I'll, uh, be explaining Mr. Alastair's role to everyone tomorrow morning," she got out weakly, feeling trapped.

"Well; well, I'll look forward to having you with us, Rand. You won't find a nicer boss in town!" Harold assured him with a vast chuckle as he faded back into the crowd.

"You seem to be well-liked by your staff," Rand drawled.

She sighed, acknowledging the truth. "We're a publicly owned company but somehow everyone still thinks of it as a family firm."

"How long ago did you go public with your stock?" he asked, suddenly serious.

"Almost as soon as I took over. We needed capital badly."

"The stock is now widely held? You don't have any large controlling blocks sitting in friendly hands?"

"You needn't look so superior. I had no choice at the time! I couldn't get the loans I needed from the banks."

"You don't have to defend your actions to me, sweetheart," he murmured caressingly. "I understand completely. Now, though, I think we'd better circulate. People are beginning to notice that I'm getting your undivided attention."

He put a hand firmly under her elbow and waded into the crowd. Kalinda felt herself helplessly swept along, her thoughts in a turmoil, her heart beating a little too fast and her nerves singing a tune on the ragged edge of an emotion she didn't want to admit feeling.

IT SEEMED LIKE forever before she gratefully closed the door on the last guest and turned to see Rand pouring himself a snifter of cognac. He had drunk very little during the course of the evening and he looked as if he were anticipating the nightcap with relish.

She watched grimly as he lowered himself into an apricot chair and put up his feet.

She fit her hands to her hips, the silk dress soft beneath her fingers. "You're not staying here tonight. Last weekend was a mistake and I don't intend to repeat it."

"Come here and let me change your mind," he offered, extending an arm invitingly upward to draw her down onto his lap.

Kalinda stepped away, scooping up a stack of glasses and heading for the kitchen. Just as she set the glasses down with a clink Rand came up behind her, his hands gliding possessively around her waist.

"I want you, sweetheart," he murmured, his breath warm on her hair. "More than I wanted you that morning in the mountains. At the time I didn't think anything could be stronger than that need. Why do you think I followed you back to Denver?"

She trembled as his lips touched the back of her neck and his fingertips gently circled the tips of her breasts through the silk blouse.

"I never intended to go to bed with you!"

"Then why did you?" he countered. "Because you wanted me as much as I wanted you," he answered for her, all sure, masculine triumph as he pulled her close.

Just as it had that morning in his home by the lake, the potent desire in

him reached out to trap her senses. Kalinda felt herself sinking against him, responding to his passion with a desperate craving of her own.

"Take me into your bed, Kalinda. I swear I'll keep the marauding sharks away from your door for you."

She turned her head into his shoulder. "I thought it was yourself you called a shark," she reminded him shakily, trying to think straight. "Are you really a shark?" she whispered, tipping her head back to meet his eyes searchingly.

"Yes," he said with heavy honesty. "But I'll never work against you. Please believe me!"

She shook her head, dazed. "But I don't understand, Rand. What were you doing for the past year and a half in the mountains?"

He hesitated, as if uncertain how to explain himself. "I was running away from the shark I had become. A year and a half ago I took a good look at myself, sweetheart, and decided I didn't like what I saw. I needed time to discover another side of life. So I went to the mountains."

Kalinda saw the naked, vulnerable look in his eyes and knew in that moment that he'd never told another soul what he'd just told her.

"What makes you believe it will be any different this time, Rand?"

"This time I have something more important than building an empire," he said, sweeping her up into his arms with an easy movement.

When he turned unerringly down the hall to her bedroom, Kalinda's head fell back against his shoulder, her lashes drooping softly to flicker on her cheeks.

He soothed her body with his hands and lips, finding the secret places he had discovered once before and re-forging the bond he'd created then. Even as he made love to her, tuning her body to his, Kalinda realized the strength of the link he had bound her with that morning in the mountains.

Rand came to her with a fierce and gentle power that left her no option but to respond in kind.

In the darkness she clung to him as she had that morning by the lake, knowing with an almost violent satisfaction that this time she couldn't run away when it was over.

*

KALINDA awoke the next morning with a curious sense of expectancy. She sensed the missing weight beside her in the bed and turned her tousled head on the pillow. At the same moment that she registered the empty place where Rand had been she realized the shower was going full blast.

She lay perfectly still for a moment, letting the memories of last night's passion and intimacy wash over her. Again and again in the darkness Rand had reached for her, pulling her close, telling her of his need.

And she had gone to him, refusing to think of the future, allowing only her woman's need to satisfy and be satisfied to guide her.

Last night had been probably only the beginning of an affair as far as Rand was concerned, but for her it had brought the blinding realization that she was in love with the man.

She didn't want to be. Kalinda had no real desire to be in love with anyone. The last time she had allowed her emotions to become vulnerable she had

been made to look a fool. Yet two years later she found herself swept into a far more passionate situation than she had ever known with David—and this time with a man she barely knew.

It was only later over breakfast that Kalinda finally found the courage to bring up a subject which had been on her mind since she awoke.

"Where did you plan on staying while you're in Denver, Rand?"

There was a heavy pause from the other side of the table. Rand was regarding her with a rather enigmatic speculation.

Kalinda held on to her determination. "I think that as long as you're intent on working for Brady we ought to maintain a . . . a more businesslike association."

"I didn't come back to Denver only to work for you."

Kalinda felt herself go warm under the caressing glance he poured over her. "Do you always follow your latest female interest in order to pursue an affair?" she whispered.

"I haven't been out of those mountains for eighteen months," he said evenly. The edge of his mouth turned upward and he said carelessly, "As you are soon going to learn, I am nothing if not a first-rate strategist and decision-maker. I know what I want, Kalinda."

"And you think you want me?"

"I know I want you. But if it will make you less fretful this morning I'll tell you I have a place to stay."

He dug into his eggs with gusto.

LATER THAT morning Kalinda realized she wasn't the only one with a profound wariness of Rand Alastair's motives. The hard chill in the air that

greeted her as she walked into the conference room with Rand at her side took Kalinda by surprise.

"What I have to say will be a shock for all of you," she began grimly, glancing around the table. "To put it bluntly, Brady Data Processing has become the target company of a hostile bid—"

The rumble of stunned, accusing voices interrupted her.

"You can't just turn the company over without a fight!" Harold Sebastian interrupted forcefully, bringing his hand down flatly on the table. He swung his head around to stare at Rand who merely arched an eyebrow in response.

"We need an expert," Kalinda said, forging on. "Mr. Alastair claims competence in the specialized area of business we need at this moment. With your approval I intend to hire him to advise us during the next few weeks."

"Hire him!" The startled exclamation was repeated around the table as everyone turned to stare uncomprehendingly at everyone else.

"Miss Brady," Margaret Vannon said very slowly, her graying blond hair still an attractive frame for her pleasant features. "Who, exactly, is proposing to take over Brady?"

She told them the name of David Hutton's firm and saw the astonishment in their faces.

"Hutton is trying to force a merger on us?" Harold asked a little blankly, staring at Rand again. "Have you really agreed to help Brady in this matter?"

Rand inclined his head in silent agreement.

There was a thoughtful silence while everyone absorbed this. Kalinda was

still trying to figure out what her staff knew about Rand that she didn't when the vice president in charge of marketing said half-humorously, "How's it going to feel being on the other side of the action, Mr. Alastair?"

"Interesting," Rand replied, a small, anticipatory grin on his lips.

Harold Sebastian approached her as the meeting broke up sometime later, an apologetic smile on his face.

"You've really pulled off a coup, Kalinda. That man's reputation alone might be enough to spike David Hutton's guns!"

"He's admitted he knows something about the conglomeration business, but..."

"Knows something about it! I finally realized this morning who he is. My God, Kalinda, that man was the terror of every firm in the Rockies up until about two years ago. He had a reputation as a corporate raider that made Genghis Khan look tame! You were working at that firm in Houston then." Harold grinned. "To have him actually working for us...!"

"You don't mind having a shark around as long as he's on your side?"

"Business is business," Harold chuckled and then excused himself to hurry off to his office.

THE OFFICES of Brady Data Processing took on the atmosphere of an armed camp preparing for battle. Most of the management staff stayed late that day. Rand was intent on immersing himself in a thorough understanding of Brady's resources, weaknesses, and possible options.

Finally, shortly after ten o'clock he closed the manila folder in front of him and got to his feet. "Come on, honey,

let's go. I'm going to show you my apartment." He smiled benignly.

"I meant what I said this morning," she began determinedly.

"I said I'd show you the apartment. I didn't promise to seduce you, too." He gathered up a stack of papers and shoved them into a leather case. "I'm not even sure I could at this stage," he reflected seriously. "It's been awhile since I worked like this. I'm a little out of shape!"

She smiled at that. "You don't look it. You look like an eager war-horse getting back into the harness."

He took her arm and walked her toward the door. "Nevertheless, the stamina requirements are a trifle different than those of fishing and pottery-making."

The white Lotus sped through the night toward an elegant apartment building near the downtown area. It was not far from her own town house.

"How do you happen to have an apartment, Rand?" she murmured.

"I own the building," he confessed. "It was one of the few things I hung on to when I opted out a year and a half ago."

The apartment was similar to the decor in his house by the lake. Browns and caramels were the predominant colors of the low-slung, modern furniture. He sank down onto the leather cushions, tugging her gently down beside him, and reached for the leather case he brought with him.

"Now, I've got a couple more questions about your relationship with the banks," he said calmly.

He didn't appear to have any intention of trying to seduce her tonight. She honestly didn't know whether to be glad or feel insulted.

Half an hour later she settled more closely against him. He was enjoying this, she thought sleepily.

Belatedly Kalinda remembered the occasional feeling she'd had in the mountains that he'd latched on to her because he had been as bored as she was up there.

The thought of serving as an accidental catalyst for a man who once again was seeking a change of life-style was not a pleasant one. What happened to the catalyst after it had served its purpose?

*

KALINDA awoke hours later to find dawn pearling the sky outside the massive windows. She blinked, stirred warmly and finally opened her eyes to find herself wedged between the back of the sofa and Rand's lean frame.

They were still wearing their business suits, she realized, minus the jackets. Her camel skirt and white, bow-tie blouse would never be the same. Her brown-blond hair was hanging loosely around her shoulders and she felt terribly mussed and sleep-tousled.

There was an unmistakable contentment in the eased lines around Rand's mouth and eyes. For a long moment Kalinda stared down at him, absorbing each detail along with the fact that she loved him. The look of contentment, she now realized, wasn't because he'd spent the night by her side. It was because Rand Alastair was finally back where he wanted to be. He had emerged from his year and a half of retirement to resume the fast-paced, perilous life he had known before opting out of the business world.

Kalinda might have been the one to galvanize him into realizing he was bored with retirement, but how long would she hold his interest once the transition back to the business world had been made? The thought of watching Rand grow bored with her was frightening.

She was staring at him, wondering unhappily how she would explain her feelings to Rand when the chestnut lashes flickered against his cheekbones and lifted.

"What's wrong, Kalinda?" His fingers tightened around hers, as if he were preparing for physical struggle.

"There's nothing wrong, Rand. I just want to make it clear that I meant what I said yesterday morning about maintaining a...a businesslike relationship for a while." She tried to speak rationally, keeping her emotions under control. But it was difficult with him looking at her like that, as if she really were more important to him than business. "Rand, I'm grateful for your help in this crisis. But, please, don't confuse your feelings about coming back to the business world with...with any feelings you might have for me."

He stared at her. "You've got it all worked out, haven't you? I'm not going to deny that I might have been growing bored with my life-style in the mountains. A year and a half of fishing and part-time employment can be a bit more than relaxing. It can make a man restless...."

"I knew it," she murmured, lowering her eyes.

"But," he went on relentlessly, lifting her chin with thumb and forefinger. "You made it clear that you weren't interested in an affair with a

lazy trout fisherman and pottery-maker. You wanted a man from your own world. Okay, you've got him. Don't you dare try to back out of our deal now!"

Kalinda froze at the cold, hard edge in his voice. "We didn't have any sort of 'deal,' Rand!"

"We do now," he countered and crushed her lips beneath his own, as if to seal it.

It was a harsh, ruthless, dominating kiss, with none of the warm, seductive persuasiveness she'd known in the past. It was as if he was intent on letting her know that he could dominate not only the world in which she made her living, but Kalinda, herself.

THE REST of the day passed much as the preceding one. Rand was constantly on the phone to banks, old acquaintances who owed him favors, and people who knew an astonishing amount about the inside workings of David Hutton's fledgling empire.

He took her home that night around ten o'clock and he didn't try to invite himself inside. Kalinda thought he looked rather preoccupied, in fact, and wondered at his almost casual good-night kiss.

When she went into work the next morning, he was there ahead of her, already on his second cup of coffee apparently and he looked up inquiringly as she stood in her doorway.

"What's the battle plan for today?" she questioned in a decidedly businesslike voice.

"Today we plan dinner at the restaurant where David Hutton will be dining tonight," he said casually.

She stared at him. "But why?"

"He knows I'm involved with Brady. Tonight he'll find out just how much. So he'll see that there's no point in trying to subvert me," Rand told her carelessly.

"Subvert you! Good Lord! Rand, are you telling me he might try buying you off?"

"He already has. I got the call last night after I'd taken you home." Rand appeared totally unconcerned. "I didn't talk to Hutton directly. I just received a feeler from one of his higher-ranking employees."

"My God!" Kalinda shook her head, unable to believe it. "What... what did you tell the person?"

"What do you think I said?" Rand muttered gruffly.

She stared at him, assessing, remembering, analyzing. "You told him no, of course. You would never break your word to us," she replied positively, relaxing slightly as she realized it was the simple truth.

There was a tension-filled moment as they sat regarding each other in silent understanding and then Rand smiled gently.

"Thank you, Kalinda."

She shrugged. She trusted him. There was nothing more to say on that subject. "So why are we having dinner in the same restaurant as David tonight?"

"Because he'll try upping the offer, thinking he only has to find the right price. I want to squash that notion flat. I want to start closing doors on him as rapidly and as solidly as possible so that he begins to panic." Rand spoke intently, a frown of concentration creasing his forehead. "If we can turn the tables on him quickly enough, I

think we can get him to withdraw the offer. He has to know we've got a whole series of options and we'll use every damn one of them until he's out in the cold."

"Have we really got a whole series of options?"

"Yes, but most of them are expensive. It would be nice if we can kill his interest before we have to resort to them. We can find a friendly suitor for Brady Data Processing who will agree to merge with us on our terms, which is better than turning everything over to Hutton. But there's another option, I think. You have surprisingly good credit for a company this size. Your assets are solid and generally rather understated. I think, with a little fast talking, we might be able to get your line of credit expanded so that Brady can better Hutton's offer for its own shares," he said quietly.

"That would be expensive," she whispered thoughtfully.

Rand spread out a financial report and began talking in detail.

Kalinda listened, fascinated with the expertise she was witnessing. Where would Rand Alastair have been today if he hadn't dropped out a year and a half ago? The thought crossed her mind that he might have been the one trying to take over Brady Data Processing. She wouldn't have stood a chance!

"BUT I COULD use a little guidance on how to play the upcoming scene," she said in the restaurant.

"Just follow my lead, all right?" he said. "Ah! Here he comes now. Looks just like his picture."

Kalinda stiffened, the sense of adventure going out of the evening as re-

ality intruded. Rand was getting to his feet as David came to a pointed halt.

"Good evening, Kalinda," the well-remembered voice said suavely. "I don't believe you ever met my wife. Darling, this is Kalinda Brady. She and I are presently involved in some business negotiations."

Kalinda could have screamed at the harmless way in which he said that, but she looked beyond David's handsome features to the face of the woman. It was a lovely, charming face, a face that said the other woman knew nothing about the darker side of her husband's nature.

"Good evening, Mrs. Hutton," Kalinda said politely, holding out her hand. And then Kalinda glanced at Rand, preparing to introduce him.

"I don't believe we've met," Rand was already saying smoothly, before Kalinda could get the proper words out of her mouth. He looked straight at David. "I'm Rand Alastair, Kalinda's fiancé."

"I hadn't realized you were engaged, Kalinda." The dark gaze that Kalinda had once found so attractive pierced her, looking for the lie.

"It's a very recent development," she explained.

"Last weekend, in fact," Rand elaborated, smiling fondly at Kalinda. "We were on vacation in the mountains," he went on. "Soon after we arrived back in town we discovered some rather urgent business had developed." Rand caught David Hutton's assessing glance. "Nothing very complicated; so it shouldn't take too long."

"I had heard you'd gone to work for Brady Data Processing," David said coldly. "It must have taken the prom-

ise of a considerable financial reward to draw you out of retirement."

"Money, I'm afraid, had nothing to do with it. Kalinda was the reason I decided to get involved in the business world again."

Kalinda felt a happy warmth flood her veins.

"I see," David said icily. "You don't appear to think this rather urgent business matter you mentioned will take long to settle?"

"Not at all." Rand smiled his shark's smile. "A quite simple bit of corporate game-playing. Kalinda's firm is surprisingly strong. Her credit flexibility would astound you. I rather think when the current matter is settled I may encourage her to do a little corporate hunting."

The thought of turning the tables on David nearly made Kalinda laugh. It was all she could do to maintain only a polite, amused smile.

"That's enough business for tonight, David," Hutton's wife was saying cheerfully, a fine-boned hand on her husband's sleeve. "We really should leave these two by themselves. They're probably taking an evening to celebrate their engagement."

"How did you guess?" Rand said dryly.

"Yes, of course, my dear," David said absently, his angry gaze on Kalinda's amused expression.

Her smile broadened as she politely inclined her head in farewell. There was so much David wanted to say and so little he could say under the circumstances. She saw it all in those handsome dark eyes. He was frustrated, angry, and beginning to perceive his own potential failure.

Without a word he turned and walked stiffly away with his wife. Rand sat down slowly, his thoughtful gaze on his opponent.

Kalinda didn't hesitate. Leaning forward, she growled, "You might have warned me!"

"I was afraid you wouldn't agree to it."

"So you sprang it on me just as you sprung it on David." She shook her head. "When I first met you in the mountains I kept telling myself your talents were being wasted. I was right."

"I'm not sure that's a compliment," he groaned. "But I'll let it go for now."

"I came much too close to a... a business marriage once before," she breathed shakily, not meeting his eyes.

"And you're afraid that's all it would be between us?" he pressed huskily.

"I think Brady Data Processing is only a first step for you on your road back to an empire. I don't want to be used...."

"Used!"

"I know you wouldn't do it deliberately," she began.

"I don't care what you call our relationship at this point," he bit out with impatient savagery. "Whatever it is, it's going to happen. Because I'm going to take you back to your apartment tonight and make love to you until you are no longer capable of finding reasons for it not to happen!"

"Rand!" His name was almost a cry. He meant it. She could see the intention in his eyes, knew he wouldn't be stopped now that he'd made up his mind.

"Come on, Kalinda," he ordered, his tone softening but becoming no less determined. "Let's go home."

The tension tautened between them on the drive back to Kalinda's town house. Rand said nothing as he guided her through the door of her home.

Wordlessly they stared at each other and then whatever bits of protest Kalinda might have found were blocked as Rand began to renew the claim he had on her. He rained aggressive, mastering kisses down her throat.

"Kalinda, you can't deny this feeling between us. You can't possibly say it's based on business!" The words were grated roughly against her skin as he began to unbutton her velvet jacket. "Admit you want me, sweetheart," he commanded gruffly.

It was the simple truth. With a moan of acceptance of her fate, Kalinda wound her arms around his neck, returning his kisses with passionate, yielding intensity. "I want you, Rand," she whispered against his throat as his hands found her breasts and began bringing them to fullness. She went to work on the buttons of his shirt. "I should have known I couldn't out-reason a skilled manipulator like you," she added wistfully, her mouth lifting at the corners.

"Not when you're all wrong in your reasoning process!"

"Am I, Rand?" she whispered.

"Yes," he growled as their clothes fell to the carpet. "All wrong..."

She closed her eyes briefly in expectation as he bent to lift her into his arms. But instead of carrying her into the bedroom, he settled her on the thick green living room carpet. She turned into his arms, her need shining in her eyes.

Committed now, she kissed him with all the longing in her heart, using the ancient, womanly wiles buried in every nerve ending. Once more, as she always seemed to do with this man, Kalinda put the future aside. It just didn't seem as important as expressing her love in the present. Even if that love must remain mute.

"Tell me again that you want me, sweetheart," he whispered beguilingly.

"I want you. Oh, God! How I want you!" Trapped in the depths of her own desire she would have told him the truth if he had asked it of her. She would have willingly told him of her love. But he didn't ask that question. Instead, incredibly, he asked another. One she wasn't prepared for at all.

"If you really want me so much," he grated heavily, "then there's no reason for us not to marry, is there? I could never tolerate letting you go to another man after what we've shared. Say you'll marry me, sweet Kalinda. Make the engagement real."

Weakened with longing and unable to argue at that moment, Kalinda heard herself whisper the answer.

"Yes, Rand. I'll marry you. I'll do anything you want."

*

TWO DAYS later a somewhat tired-looking Rand appeared in Kalinda's office doorway. She had seen him only at work since the night he had seduced her into agreeing to marry him.

The next day at work he had been all business, never mentioning the traumatic events of the evening. He had devoted himself to his task at Brady with single-minded determination. She knew he'd talked to people high up in

David Hutton's firm, spelling out exactly how Brady Data Processing was prepared to match the hostile merger offer to shareholders or to find a friendly corporate marriage partner. That night he'd taken Kalinda home late after work and left her politely on her doorstep.

She had just put down the receiver, a small smile on her face as she considered David Hutton's surprising phone call, when Rand appeared leaning in the doorway with deceptive casualness. But she saw the flicker of excitement and satisfaction in his eyes.

"It's all over but the shouting, honey," he advised laconically. "You should be hearing something soon. I just talked to my contact at Hutton's firm. They're throwing in the towel. We're... I mean, you're going to get out of this relatively unscathed."

"Thanks to you." Her smile broadened as she absorbed the manner in which he was hiding his personal satisfaction. "I just got word from David, himself." She gestured at the telephone.

Rand lifted one chestnut brow inquiringly. "So soon?"

"He's withdrawing the offer." She decided there was no point mentioning what David had said prior to calling off the hostile merger attempt. "He can't afford us."

Rand nodded as if to himself. There was something more than satisfaction in his expression. A hint of anxiety? Perhaps even wariness? She didn't understand it, but if it was simply a matter of his ego needing a little stroking she had no objections. He deserved it.

"It's over, Rand, and you're the reason Brady is still an independent concern." Kalinda depressed the in-

tercom button and leaned forward slightly. "George, would you please round everyone up in the main conference room as soon as possible?"

There was a fractional hesitation and then George's curiosity got the better of him. "Good news, Miss Brady? Or bad?"

"The best, George. And as soon as you notify everyone about the meeting would you mind taking a minute to find us a place that can accommodate a celebration this afternoon?"

She released the intercom button and stood up, meeting Rand's dryly amused gaze.

"What's the matter?" she grinned. "Not used to being on the side of the underdog?"

He winced, as if she'd stung him. "Frankly, I've never seen it from this side," he admitted.

Two hours later the jubilant Brady staff adjourned from work early. George had succeeded in finding a colorful beer and pizza tavern that was willing to welcome so many people on such short notice.

Kalinda smothered a grin as a toast went up, beer mugs on high. It was one of several and the subject this time was Rand. She could have sworn he was turning a dull red. Amused, she leaned close and under cover of the cheers, whispered. "We're big on heroes!"

"It's not a role I'm accustomed to playing." He looked at her with sudden sharpness. "Kalinda, I have to talk to you."

"Now?"

"As soon as possible."

Beneath the rustically carved table, Kalinda's palms went strangely damp.

"All right, Rand. I don't think we'll be

missed." She didn't look at him as she spoke.

There were several good-natured calls protesting their departure, but no one seemed unduly upset.

Rand drove back to his apartment without speaking. It made Kalinda even more nervous.

As he opened the door of the apartment there was hard determination in every line of his body.

"Kalinda, I've done a lot of thinking since the night you agreed to marry me. I had to stop Hutton's takeover..."

She waited, not understanding.

His mouth hardened. "I wanted you to be proud of me, to admire me. And instead, I've given you every reason to fear me. I realized that after I left you the other night. And I've seen the wariness in you for the past couple of days."

"Rand," Kalinda broke in a little breathlessly, hope and despair shredding her nerves. "What is it you think I'm afraid of?"

"That I'll take Brady away from you. Use it as the foundation of a new conglomerate controlled by me. In short, that I'll do to you what Hutton tried to do two years ago and again this week," he told her flatly.

She stared at the sleek, proud head, her heart almost too full for words.

"You idiot," she managed lovingly. "That thought never entered my mind."

The broad shoulders were held tautly. "You thought I was using you..."

"Not in that sense. I was only afraid that you were using me in your own mind as an excuse for coming back to Denver and your old life. I didn't want

you confusing your emotions for me with those for your work. I certainly never thought you'd try to take Brady from me! Ask David Hutton," she concluded bluntly as he swung around almost violently.

"Hutton!"

"Oh, yes," she smiled, remembering the phone call that morning. "It was his last-ditch effort. He tried to tell me what you would do to me and the firm once you had salvaged it from his grasp. Tried to convince me I was much better off turning everything over to him."

"What did you tell him?" The question was quiet and vulnerable.

"The same thing I'm going to tell you. I trust you completely, Rand." She didn't move, but she knew her eyes would be reflecting her love and trust.

He watched her with a hunger that had nothing to do with physical desire.

"Do you realize," he said, each word deliberate and carved with dazed wonder, "you're probably the only human being in the Rocky Mountain Empire who has ever said that to me?" He came forward, pulling her into his arms as if he were afraid she might break.

"Oh, my darling Kalinda, I know you haven't had time to fall in love with me but you want me, you can't hide that, and you trust me. Surely that's a start. Someday I'll make you love me as much as I love you. I swear it!"

Kalinda felt him tremble as she pressed her face into his shoulder. "And to think," she whispered shakily, "that I once credited you with an unusual degree of perception!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

"I love you, Rand. From the beginning, I think. I knew when I left you that morning in the mountains I'd never be completely free of you. I knew I'd never fully recover from my 'vacation fling.'" When you showed up at my door the night of the party I was never so relieved to see anyone in my life. I realized that night I was in love with you."

"Kalinda, my love..." he breathed as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. She felt the relief in him.

His hands moved yearningly along her back as he stared down at her. He looked as if he didn't fully trust his luck. He folded her to him.

"I think," he rasped close to her ear as he tugged at the comb that held her hair, "the president of Brady Data Processing should take a little time off."

She shivered as her hair tumbled down her shoulders, aware of his hands moving through the golden-

brown tresses with masculine delight. "A vacation?"

"I was thinking more in terms of a honeymoon," he replied, slipping off the jacket of her suit. "It so happens I know of a delightful mountain retreat on the bank of a scenic lake..."

"Indoor facilities, I trust?"

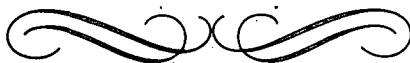
"Only the finest," he assured her simply, removing her small-collared blouse as she began fumbling with the buttons of his shirt. "Fresh trout in the morning, arts and crafts in the afternoon, daily picnics."

"It sounds charming."

As her lacy bra slid to the carpet, Rand groaned and crushed her to his naked chest. "Will you come back to the mountains for a honeymoon with me, Kalinda?" he begged, as they stepped out of the last of their clothes. "I promise you won't be bored."

"I wasn't bored last time, not after I met you," she confessed as he molded her body to his own.

And then he was demonstrating the wonder and depths of his love to the woman who had developed a passionate love for a shark.






ANN MAJOR Dazzle



Liz Chartres vowed to resist Prince Alexander Vorzenski's intoxicating powers, to forget the man who had aroused her to the greatest heights of passion—and then accused her of betraying his secrets. But how could a woman command a heart that would not obey...?



He did not see the fat brown package beneath the *Times*, hidden as cozily as a time bomb in his mail.

Sipping a tart, fizzling drink, he reached for a section of the *Times* and began to read with the fascination of a man who'd long been married to the business world. He frowned as he noted Dazzle's stock had fallen a point while Radiance's had risen.

On first glance, he did not appear the entrepreneur at all. Prince Mikhail Alexander Vorzenski had the look of a pirate about him. He was tough and lean, a tall man who was powerfully built. Despite his charisma and his easy smiles, he was a difficult man to know. Only one woman had glimpsed beneath his surface hardness. Only she had discovered the lovelessness of his childhood, the parents who had had no time for him—his father a titled playboy, his mother a workaholic.

For the briefest time Liz had shown Alexander a world where love could be had without the need of conquests. After her, he was harder and lonelier, his victories in the business world more ruthless than before.

His strength served him well. If it were not for his sheer ruthlessness and drive, he would have long ago lost the presidency of Dazzle, Ltd., the vast family-owned international company he controlled. There were those who wanted to take it from him. Others still blamed him for what his wife, Liz, had done seven years ago.

His enemies were watchful, resentful. Dazzle, a leading manufacturer of

perfume in England and Europe, had been sailing through rough seas for the past few years. The worst and most recent disaster had occurred only ten days before—the explosion in one of Dazzle's top-security chemical labs in the Alps.

Alexander lay back, watching the pages of the *Financial Times* ruffle when he tossed it aside. The article in the *Times* about Dazzle and the explosion had not improved his mood.

Alexander tried to relax. The quiet, familiar sounds of the Mediterranean came to him; the gentle lapping of wavelets against the snowy fiberglass hull of his yacht, the distant purr of the incessant summer traffic of Monte Carlo.

The papers beside him began to flap. A brisk westerly gust would have sent newsprint flying had Alexander not seized them. He felt the lumpy brown mailer beneath them. Curious, he secured the *Times* beneath two magazines and examined the bulky envelope. In bold black letters Henson's unmistakable scrawl flowed across stiff, brown paper: "Raymond Henson and Sons, Private Investigation, Ltd."

Alexander's pulse thudded with startling violence. Seven years ago he had hired Raymond Henson to find his wife when she'd run away. He was accustomed to Henson's monthly reports. The slim white envelopes, which invariably contained a single carefully typed page that informed him there was still no trace of Liz's where-

abouts, had arrived with unfaltering regularity—until now.

Three glossy photographs lay before him. Two were of Liz.

The third photograph was of a boy uncannily like the boy he'd been himself at the age of six. Alexander drew a quick, sharp breath. He was inexorably drawn to the child. He scarcely understood his feelings; he didn't realize that all his life he'd yearned for someone to love, that what he'd once sought from his father and his older brother, he would now seek from his son. Alexander knew only that he had no choice but to go after him.

At last Alexander read the report. Henson had located Liz because he'd received an anonymous tip that Jock Rocheaux was traveling from Paris to Mexico City nearly once a month, and the reason for his trips was to visit Liz Vorzenski.

Alexander bristled at the thought of Jock having anything to do with his son. Damn Liz!

Jock was Alexander's own first cousin. They'd been boyhood friends and the most promising junior executives at Dazzle. The first break in their relationship had occurred because of an unfortunate incident involving a young woman they had both been dating.

The severe rupture had happened on a hairpin curve at a speed of over two hundred kilometers an hour. Jock decided winning a certain Grand Prix tour on the French Riviera was worth any price. Unfortunately the price had been Sasha. Jock had sent Alexander's younger brother, who was driving the car beside him, hurtling through a barricade and over a cliff in a ball of crystal flame.

Alexander had used all his stature in the company to have Jock thrust out of it. In the end Jock resigned in a rage and went to Radiance, Dazzle's rival....

Alexander set the report aside. Liz had come back into his life. Burning deep in his soul was the torture of a memory that was still too vivid—his unforgettable, his blazingly bold, his terribly defiant Liz. How he had loved her in those twelve brief weeks he had had with her.

He'd spent a fortune trying to find her. He wanted to try to understand why she had betrayed him.

Once she had told him laughingly, "Money won't buy everything, my darling. But it can buy freedoms most people can't begin to imagine." She had smiled enigmatically. "You can escape so completely when you're as rich as we are."

He'd thought she was speaking of *his* fortune. He hadn't known then who she really was and that she was incredibly rich herself, and that she was an expert at escaping, that she'd lost herself in countries, in cultures, in out-of-the-way niches in the world for months on end during the rebellious years of her youth when she'd defied her family. There had been so many secrets she had kept from him.

Once he had wanted to know everything about her. That time was past. All he wanted now was his child.

Alexander made two telephone calls. One to Paris and the other to London. He refused to listen when his older brother, Paul, told him that it was impossible for him to postpone his return to Paris, that important decisions he alone could handle had to be made. Alexander overrode every protest and gave orders for his Lear 55 to be flown

at once to his private airport on his estate in Grasse.

*

IT WAS the rainy season, and the air was crisply cool and damp. Liz wrapped her rebozo more tightly about her shoulders and sipped her first cup of coffee that morning.

An unopened letter from Jock lay on the table beside photographs of her beloved Cornwall. The letter would contain the inevitable demands. "Marry me. Leave Mexico and come to France. Forgive your father. Forget Alexander."

The coffee cup clattered as she set it in its saucer. Divorce Alexander?

The haunting vision of Alexander's burnished maleness, his jet dark hair, his golden eyes, rose in her mind's eye. She saw him again as she'd seen him the night they'd met, at a beach party in Deauville after a sailing regatta he'd won. It was ironic that it was Mimi, her father's mistress, who had suggested the holiday on the coast of France.

Mimi had said, "A few days together... away from your father... will give us the opportunity to get to know each other other."

Liz had wondered if Mimi sensed that she felt uneasy in her presence. Mimi had always been friendly, and yet from the first Liz had felt a reticence toward her. Even her father had noted it. He had said, "It is not easy for a man like me to live alone, Liz. I know Mimi is... different, but that is often the case with famous actresses. There is this ego problem."

Perhaps he was right, or perhaps it was only the normal jealousy a daughter might feel toward her father's mistress who was years younger than he.

They'd come late to the grand old château, which was aglitter and alive with laughter and music and dancing. Liz noticed Alexander at once. She was deeply conscious of his eyes following her. She had whispered excitedly in Mimi's ear, "Who is that man? The conceited one with the black hair."

Mimi's throaty voice didn't sound like her own. "You were buried too long in Cornwall before your father found you. That's Mikki Vorzenski. He's the new president of his family's fragrance company, Dazzle. They say he is a despoiler of women. Roger told me that his own family has exiled him to London. You must stay away from him."

"Mikki Vorzenski!" Liz murmured. "Oh, no." A terrifying hollowness in her stomach made Liz feel sick.

Her father had warned her and had made her promise to avoid him. "Mikki Vorzenski and I are old, old enemies, my child. He is a ruthless thief in the perfume world. He would like nothing better than to hurt me through you." In the short time she'd known Jock Rocheaux, her father had made it clear that he wanted her to marry him.

Mimi drifted away, and Liz hurried blindly across the ancient cobblestones of the darkened garden. Heavy footsteps thudded behind her.

That night of their first awareness—one for the other—would be forever frozen in Liz's memory. She had never been so immediately drawn to another human being as she was to this striking man, her father's enemy.

He had stared at the mad pulsebeat at her throat and the faint tremor in her hands. His eyes slid over her. Everywhere his gaze touched her, her skin

flushed as if singed by a tongue of flame.

Before she could escape him, he seized her hand and drew her to him.

His heady masculine scent enveloped her. A powerful, unconquerable force bound them one to the other in a spell of electric enchantment.

With a half-smothered groan, he crushed her slim body against the awesomely lean power of his.

They'd both come so far, traveling through two lifetimes of loneliness to find each other.

He lowered his mouth to possess hers, but she reached up and brushed his lips with her fingers.

"No," she said breathlessly.

"Why are you so afraid of me?" he asked. "Why did you run away?"

"Because we cannot be."

"But we are," he said forcefully.

"Yes," she murmured. "And that is more frightening than anything." In agonized passion she nuzzled her face against the warmth of his throat, and his hands moved caressingly through her hair, pressing her head even more tightly against him to reassure her.

"What should I call you?" she asked after prolonged silence.

"Everyone calls me Mikki," he said.

That name jarred; it was the name her father had taught her to hate and fear.

"I don't want to call you what everyone calls you."

"My mother calls me Mikhail."

She frowned, and he saw that she didn't like that either.

"No one calls me Alexander..."

"Alexander." She said his name softly, sexily, possessively, and then she smiled. "It's a shame to have a name that no one uses. I will call you Alexander."

"What will I call you?"

"Why, Liz, of course."

"No choice?" he asked. "No last name even?"

Her expression was momentarily shadowed, her fleeting smile enigmatic. *Tell him*, a tiny voice sounded in the back of her mind. "Killigen," she said in a strange, tight voice. It was the truth, and yet it was a lie. It was the name of the place she'd called home and of the man she'd called father.

After Alexander conquered her reluctance, there had been no stopping their soaring passion. She had known from the moment his name was whispered to her in Deauville that their love could never be, and yet she soon married him without telling him who she really was.

Now, seven years later, she was in Mexico alone with her twins. How blindly stupid she had been.

Crumpling Jock's letter, she threw it in the trash. She would have to keep putting him off, at least for now.

From the balcony, Liz could see the peasants walking up the winding road from their village to open the doll factory—her factory. They dressed as they had for centuries, the women with dark-colored skirts and high-necked blouses, the men in their white cotton jackets and trousers, straw sombreros, leather huaraches, and serapes. The factory they worked in every day was one of Liz's few solaces. It was the one thing she could truly count on.

LIZ SURVEYED the destruction. Her entire factory was floating in three feet of water.

Juan, the foreman, shushed the others to silence so that he could speak. "*Señora*, the water tower on the roof broke and flooded the factory."

His low, Spanish voice held both anxiety and defeat.

Liz thought of New York, where she'd found a vast new outlet for her dolls. Now this.

She waded through the water. She felt the stinging fire of tears behind her eyelids, but she fought them back.

"I will not give up. *We* will not give up," she said.

Her Spanish was awkward. But the people who worked for her loved the soft sound of her voice despite her confusing conjugations and hopelessly jumbled pronouns. They heard strength and hope.

Long ago, when Liz had first come to the deserted hacienda, the people had regarded her with suspicion. They gave her their sympathy when they learned she was pregnant and alone, their respect when she'd begun her factory.

Liz beckoned Juan and gave him specific orders. Then she telephoned Manuel Rodriguez, her partner, and told him they had to have more machines at once.

Liz worked long into the afternoon, racing between her office and the factory, making uncounted decisions as to what could be salvaged and what should be thrown out. It was a painful process.

An entire shipment of fifteen-inch dolls resembling miniature princesses from imperial Russia, all lavishly costumed to attend a dance in the tsar's Winter Palace, were soaked. The research that had gone into the creation of these dolls had been monumental, the labor in their gem-studded diadems, gossamer veils and rich ball gowns awesome. Now they were ruined.

She forgot about lunch and the siesta hour until Esmeralda, her babysitter, tiptoed into her office. Then Liz's stomach growled ferociously as she realized it was long past the hour she usually had lunch with the children.

When Esmeralda said nothing, Liz glanced up and saw the misery contorting her face. Liz knew that a new catastrophe had struck.

"What have the little rascals done this time, Emmie?" she asked lightly.

"Nothing, *señora*," Esmeralda waived. "The little angels are gone!"

Panic rose like a hot wave in Liz's throat.

"Gone?" Liz's tired mind refused to accept this new crisis.

"Even the burro Pablo. I left them in the meadow to ride Pablo, but he was being so stubborn he wouldn't move. When I came back they were gone."

"ALEX. Samantha. *Queridos*. Oh, my darlings. Where are you?"

Liz sagged wearily against a tree and listened to the silence. Her teeth began to chatter.

Just when she thought she must return to get flashlights and warmer clothing, Liz heard the sounds of childish laughter.

"Come on, Pablo. This way." Samantha was coaxing her pet, who was renowned for his stubbornness.

Liz was about to call to Samantha when the velvet warmth of an all-too-familiar male voice came to her.

"You're sure this is the way back, Samantha?"

"No, Daddy, I'm not sure," Samantha admitted. "Maybe Pablo is right."

It couldn't be. He couldn't be! Not here!

She saw him then, walking in the moonlight, and she stopped as though a witch had frozen her with a spell. Liz felt his intense, devouring gaze. There was a look of astonishment scrawled on his handsome face. His hair was as black as the deepest shadows; his golden eyes were molten with hot, unfathomable emotions.

All the feelings that she'd told herself were dead came alive like the searing, raw pain of an open wound, and she knew how terribly she had missed him, how terribly she still loved him.

"Mommy! Mommy!"

The spell of enchantment that bound Liz and Alexander was broken. The children tumbled headlong into her arms, breathless in their excitement.

"Pablo ran away, and Daddy came! We got lost in the woods chasing Pablo, but we weren't scared because Daddy was with us."

Liz hugged them closely, silently, frantically, before they darted back to Alexander. How had he won their affection so quickly? It was an ominous sign.

"Daddy said you might not let him stay with us," Alex said. "We want him to." There was a mutinous note in his voice.

Samantha cried passionately, "Mommy, please!"

Alexander's silence was no help. Why didn't he tell them it was impossible for him to stay?

"It's getting dark, and the children are cold," Alexander said curtly as she stood up. "It might be best if we went back to the hacienda before we tried to talk."

It was a rational remark, but his tone of command sparked anger in Liz. "After seven years, you and I have nothing to talk about," she lashed out, speaking in French so the children wouldn't understand.

He responded in French that was as rapid and deadly as gunfire. "The hell we don't! I've come because of my children." A muscle spasmed in his jawline.

Fear made her reckless. "You have no rights where they're concerned. You threw me out when I was pregnant."

All of his careful control disintegrated, and as he moved nearer, she realized how stupid she was to provoke him. There was danger in his hard look. It was as if she were facing a stranger instead of the husband she'd slept with, the husband whose children she'd borne.

"Let's get something straight," he said hoarsely. "I wouldn't have thrown you out if I had had the slightest idea you were pregnant. You deliberately left without telling me you were expecting, and now I find there are twins."

"I came to your office that morning to tell you," she replied quietly, "but you were already out of your mind with rage. There seemed no point then."

"Of course I was angry. You'd wrecked Dazzle and me in one staggering blow by stealing Paul's formula and giving it to Jock!"

His brown face appeared contorted through her blinding tears. "I had nothing to do with that," she whispered. "I tried to explain. I couldn't have done that to you."

"No?" There was a jeering note in his hard voice. His fingers tightened cruelly on her shoulder blades. "Then

how did Radiance steal and launch the perfume my brother, Paul, had been perfecting for more than three years? Explain why Jock named that particular essence, Liz. And while you're at it, tell me those photographs used in that launch aren't of you, my darling wife. Tell me you weren't the model for Radiance in that stinking, crooked deal! Tell me you aren't Roger Chartres's daughter! Liz, why the hell did you try to destroy me?" The anger in his voice was fierce and frightening. "Tell me, Liz, was Jock your lover?"

"No!" The single word was explosive. "How could you even think that?" she cried. "There's never been anyone except . . . except . . . you." Suddenly that angered her more than anything. What right did he have to answers from her now? Her thoughts clouded as a terrible dizziness swept her.

The brutal disappointment of the flood, the hard work, her terrifying search for the children, and Alexander's fierce anger had all taken their toll. She felt curiously weightless. His grave face blurred in a nauseating whirl. Even his strong arms could not keep her from sliding into a void that brought swift, black oblivion.

Alexander lifted her into his arms. He stared into her still face. Her flaming hair fell across his shoulders.

"Why, Liz?" he drawled in a voice that was strangled by torture, repeating the question that had haunted him for seven years. "Why did you do it, when I loved you so?"

*

ALEXANDER strode with Liz in his arms. The hacienda was brilliantly lit against the deeper blackness of the mountains, and as Alexander climbed

the path leading to the front gates, Esmeralda, Juan and several others walked out of the house. Curious, worried black eyes accosted him with a thousand half-formed suspicions.

"My wife fainted in the forest," Alexander drawled in his heavily accented Spanish, emphasizing his relationship to her. They nodded in swift understanding and immediate acceptance of him.

Alexander commanded Liz's servants with the ease of a man used to giving orders. "Take me to my wife's room."

Maria scurried to the kitchen while Esmeralda took the children. Juan led Alexander up winding tiled stairs to the *señora's* spacious bedroom.

Alexander kicked the door open, stalked inside and gently laid Liz upon her great, hand-carved Mexican bed. Juan lit an oil lamp before shutting the door, leaving the couple alone in semi-darkness.

"Alexander." Her voice was a soft whisper that stirred long-forgotten intimate memories. "Alexander, is it really you?" she murmured. Her voice held an aching tenderness. She lifted her hands to his cheek and caressed him wonderingly, inflaming him with her touch. Her softly glowing eyes held his.

Alexander groaned inwardly and brought his own hand up to remove hers. Curiously, instead of removing it, his warm fingers wrapped hers. His blood throbbed as with a fever.

Her eyes were closed, and her dreamy expression gave her the look of an angel. He remembered her wildness in his bed, her total lack of inhibitions. He remembered the way she had made love to him with her lips.

He inhaled deeply, thrusting the memories to the recesses of his mind. He had to get out of there. He was rising to make a swift exit when her hands circled his neck. She fingered the inky tendrils that fell over his collar.

A bolt of desire shuddered through him as she lowered her hands and moved them across his shoulders, drawing him down to her.

"Liz, don't do this!" he groaned, but he didn't prevent her trembling fingers from unbuttoning his shirt.

A strip of bronzed male flesh was exposed, and she leaned forward and slid her tongue across his warm skin, trailing a blazing, liquid path from his throat to his navel.

"How I want you, Liz. Damn you," he muttered.

"I tried to forget you, but when you're here, holding me, I can remember only how it always was between us."

He stared into her smoldering black eyes and was lost. He seized her and pulled her roughly against his chest, hating her, loving her, wanting her, despising her. His arms were ruthless iron bands binding her against his tough male body. "You wanted this, Liz, remember that."

He touched her everywhere but without even a trace of the infinite tenderness he'd once so lovingly shown her.

His hands moved over her bare arms, her waist, down her thighs, savoring every lush curve.

Their desire built into a wild crescendo of spiraling needs. For a timeless moment their hatred fell away, and they were lovers again, each glorying in the taste and the sensation of the other.

He took her with the swift blind need of a man who'd been too long without the one woman he wanted. For a fleeting moment he glimpsed heights he'd thought he would never see again. Then desire overcame him in a shattering burst of glory. In that final moment he crushed her beneath him as she whispered his name in complete surrender.

Afterward they lay in the hushed darkness without touching. He should never have let this happen. There could be no closeness with her. Nothing between them was changed. Still, a new, unnamed unease lingered.

He remembered suddenly the long, languid lovemaking sessions of their past. He remembered the loving hours afterward, when they'd clung to each other after their wild excesses.

Alexander rose abruptly, turning his back on the silent woman on the bed. He did not want to think of the past.

LIZ SAT UP, shading her eyes with curled fingers. The leaden weight of anguish lay upon her heart. With her fingertips she felt the crusted residue upon her cheeks from the tears she'd wept during the long night. She'd scarcely slept.

When he'd left her lying in the chill darkness, she'd felt the most profound emptiness, because she realized how deeply she still loved him, just as she realized how hopeless her feelings were.

Liz opened the drapes and looked out on the purple mountains and the broad valley. But this morning, the peaceful landscape did not bring harmony to her troubled mind. At the sound of the door, she spun around, her heart jumping chaotically. Deter-

mined not to be intimidated, she tilted her chin defiantly.

"They've all been clamoring to wake you for hours, but I wouldn't allow it," Alexander said.

Startled by this unexpected thoughtfulness toward her, she glanced at him. His cutting gaze slashed her. Whatever softness had motivated him was scarcely apparent.

"There seems to be a bit of confusion downstairs," Alexander said, "that only you can resolve."

"That's putting it mildly, I'm sure. You see, Alexander, the water tank on the roof flooded my doll factory yesterday, before you came. But enough of my problems. What do you want from me?"

He shot her a dark look. "Specifically—divorce and custody rights. I'm willing to make a generous settlement if you agree. The children will have stability. I will give them the best schools. They can spend their summers in my villa in Sardinia or one of Maman's châteaux in France."

Her voice was dangerously low. "Did it ever occur to you that it might do them irreparable damage to be separated from me? You cannot manage children the way you manage employees in your factories, Alexander. You say you will give them the best schools. Children need much more than that. Your mother—" she sprang to her feet, her hot temper flaring "—all she gave you were the best schools, those glorious villas you're throwing up at me, châteaux, and money. That's why you're hard, Alexander. I won't let you ruin my children the way your mother ruined you!"

Alexander crossed the room. He towered over her. "Are you through?"

"No. Yesterday I saw that it was a grave error on my part to take the children so far away from you despite the hostile circumstances of our separation. I was sorry for that."

"And now?"

"I wish you'd never come here." She whirled away from him, her fists clenched against her stomach as she stalked toward the windows.

From behind her his voice came, husky, gentler. "Liz—"

This new softness from him was more than the disturbed state of her nerves could handle. Liz turned around. His amber gaze startled her, compelled her. His hand reached toward her, not in anger this time, but in—

She was never to know what would have happened had they not been interrupted.

There was an embarrassed cough from behind the half-opened door. Juan stepped inside.

"*Señora*, you must come at once to the doll factory. We need your help, and that of the *señor* too, if he is willing."

"I don't think the *señor* is particularly anxious to help me," Liz said hastily. "He came here to—" She felt Alexander's fingers on her skin.

"Of course I'll help!"

Liz stared at both men in helpless confusion.

"I WON'T HAVE YOU turning my factory over to Manuel Rodriguez!" Liz said heatedly.

Alexander endured her temper with the infuriating calm he'd shown all week. There had been many tantrums since he'd started trying to avert the disaster her factory was headed for.

"Why not? He's the best man for the job."

She crossed her arms across her chest and glared at him, detesting his smug attitude. "Well, I don't like it. You're destroying everything. First you ruin morale by firing Juan."

"You should never have hired him in the first place. He's all wrong for this job. He drinks. Besides, I'm nearly positive he's been stealing."

She was trembling violently now. "And then you started paying overtime, which I can't afford."

"Yes, you can, once we get things organized. You have a good product. I can start Manuel on the road to straightening all this out. The guy's really talented at getting the maximum out of your employees. He knows when to be hard, and you don't. Liz, don't you see, without the factory to manage you'll be free to do more research and create more dolls. That's where you should focus your energy."

"My employees, even Manuel, now look to you as the boss. The *señor* can do no wrong. They think I should be pleased," Liz said grumpily.

She would not have minded his taking over her world had he genuinely wanted to make a place for her in it.

*

THE SOUND of his wife's laughter floating up from the courtyard came to Alexander as he poured over Liz's account books. Liz and the children were playing games in the courtyard.

He could not afford to make a mistake where his children were concerned. The last thing he wanted was to drag them through a lengthy court battle and the inevitable publicity such a trial would bring. So for one hellish week he had lived with his wife in or-

der to spend time with his children. He had thought he could ignore Liz by concentrating on the problems of her doll factory, the impending crisis at Dazzle and the children; but she had haunted his thoughts night and day.

How many nights had he sprung from his bed aroused by the vision of her soft, scented loveliness, consumed with the mad intention of going to her room and taking her by force. Instead he would pace the balcony bare-chested in the cold night air, pausing to stare at the moonlight slanting across the jagged black mountain peaks, waiting until his sanity returned.

To the children, Liz was warm and loving and patient. No matter what she was doing, she allowed the children to interrupt her. To his amazement, he had discovered a framed picture of himself in each of their rooms, and he'd learned that she had taught them to love him. That was why they had instantly accepted him.

Never having known the joys of family life before, Alexander found that this need in himself to be part of a family gave his wife an even deeper power over him. He was beginning to see that it would not be possible for him to separate Liz from the children. He loved them too much to deprive them of their mother.

Much to his surprise, he had discovered that Liz hadn't seen or spoken to her father since she'd run away. If she had stolen the formula for Roger Chartres, why were they now estranged? Roger had come to him once in London after Liz had run away, and begged him to tell him where Liz was. At the time Alexander had not trusted Roger enough to believe he did not know where his daughter was.

Alexander saw no easy solution to the problem of custody. A sacrifice or a compromise would have to be made.

The phone began to ring. It was Paul. The news from Paris was devastating. Alexander was suspected of having caused the fire in Dazzle's lab himself, but when Paul demanded that Alexander return, he refused. Before, it had been uncharacteristic of him to put anything before Dazzle. Now it was suicidal.

NEXT EVENING Alexander took the children into Mexico City without her.

After watching the last curl of dust behind her red Fiat, Liz sank down in her favorite chair and stared out at the darkening sky. She switched on the television, and Mimi Camille's husky purr filled the room. It was one of Mimi's early French films, with subtitles. Mimi played the part of a demonic woman with the face of an angel. Liz turned the set off abruptly, as always the mere sight of Mimi affecting her negatively. The last thing Liz needed was to think of Roger.

Later it began to rain gently. She went to bed, but she was still awake when the Fiat chugged into the drive.

Alexander and the children came upstairs. The children's voices were sleepy, his gentle and reassuring.

At last the children were quiet and Liz heard the sound of Alexander as he walked to his room, the shutting of his door, his movements from within, the creak of his bed when he lay upon it. She wanted to go to him, but she did not.

It was hours later that Samantha's cry jolted Liz awake.

Liz jumped out of bed and ran outside. Alexander's door opened, and he

stepped outside wearing only a pair of jeans.

"It's Samantha," Liz said, unconsciously reaching for his hand, and he ran with her to their child's room.

Samantha was sitting up stiffly in her bed. Alexander swept her into his arms.

"What is it, Samantha?"

Samantha's black eyes were wide in her white face. "Juan came into my room. I bit him on his hand when he put it on top of my mouth. He dropped me back onto the bed and ran out."

In a voice of steel, Alexander said, "Liz, hold Samantha while I check on Alex."

He left them, returning almost instantly, his face dark with alarm.

"Alex is gone. I think Juan took him."

"Oh, no! Juan wouldn't—" Liz bit back her cry of anguish. She remembered Juan's terrible anger when Alexander fired him.

THE MOON was hidden by the black mountains. They headed up the twisting mountain road, so overgrown it was scarcely more than a path etched between fields and forest.

"I smell smoke." Liz peered into the darkness. "Alexander!" She gripped his sleeve frantically. "Juan's jacal is on fire!"

Then they were running toward the billowing glow, Alexander quickly outdistancing Liz.

Liz reached the little cornstalk hut in time to see Alexander push a drunken Juan to the ground and dash inside the inferno.

It seemed an eternity before Alexander reemerged, carrying the limp child in his arms. Liz screamed in hor-

ror. The back of Alexander's shirt was on fire.

Ripping off her poncho, Liz began beating Alexander on the back. When the flames were out she flung her ruined poncho onto the ground.

"Alexander, are you all right?"

He stared at her, the lines of his face grim, his mouth a grimace because of his pain. "It's Alex," he muttered, "that you should worry about."

Feeling more helpless than she ever had in her life, she stroked the brow of her unconscious son. "Alex, can you hear me? Darling, Mother's here."

From behind her came Juan's drunken voice, muttering brokenly, "Fire no on purpose, *señora*. The cigarillo, I dropped him. I never hurt the *niño*. I only want to scare the *señor*."

*

THE DOCTOR worked slowly, slicing Alexander's shirt from his back. As the scissors flashed, Dr. Gomez spoke of Alex's injuries. "The boy's received a concussion. The burn on his arm is serious. He suffered smoke inhalation, but he will recover."

Liz exhaled in relief. Then she looked at Alexander. Her husband's dark face was pale. Gently she took his hand in hers as she gazed at the blackened welts and blistered flesh. The doctor gave him a shot for pain and began to cleanse the wound. Alexander went whiter, and the pressure of his grip increased.

"You are going to have to change your husband's dressing every day, *señora*. He needs to take it easy for four or five days. By then I should be able to release your son from the hospital."

When the physician left the room, Alexander said, with a weak smile,

"Well, I guess it won't be so easy for you to get rid of me after all."

"I don't want to get rid of you," she admitted softly.

THE HOUR was late that night when Liz and Alexander returned to the hacienda. She helped him get ready for bed. She knelt and poured him a glass of bottled water, and her eyes lifted to the golden brilliance of his. The room was charged with sexual tension.

His brown hand cupped her chin, and he tilted her face. Slowly and tenderly he lifted her lips to his, which were blazing hot with desire.

"Alexander, you're hardly in the condition for this sort of thing."

A hot, pulsing fire hardened in his loins. "I think I'm, er, a better judge of my condition than you, love," he said on a vibrant chuckle.

His mouth moved to each corner of her lips in turn. Then he explored her eyelids, the lush curl of her closed lashes, the winged arch of her brows.

They clung to each other, their bodies hot and shaking. She could feel his pulse thundering at the same mad tempo as her own. Silently they held each other. It was their first moment of mutual tenderness in seven years. At last Alexander put her from him.

"Sleep with me tonight, Liz. More than anything I want to fall asleep in your arms."

"All right," she murmured uncertainly.

Hot golden eyes watched her every movement as she stripped and moved into his arms.

Before she could protest, his mouth closed over hers, and he moved his body erotically over hers, crushing her in a tight embrace and thrusting deeply

inside her until their passion built to shattering ecstasy.

THE NEXT morning Liz awoke buried beneath the warmth of Alexander's body. Maria was tapping lightly on the door.

Carefully she disentangled her body from Alexander's and rose, dressing hurriedly.

Liz opened the door and slipped outside.

"*Señora*, Señor Rocheaux is here."

Liz felt a wave of alarm and rushed downstairs.

At the sight of her at the door, Jock rose and crossed the room to join her. His blue eyes slid over Liz. "You're looking—" He paused. "There's a radiance about you that I thought you'd lost forever when Mikki threw you out. He is here now, isn't he?"

Her still face told everything.

"Dazzle is in a state of absolute chaos, and for three weeks the president has been out of the country. There is only one thing in the world that could make him shirk his mammoth responsibilities. You, Liz. Does he want you back?"

"He still believes that I'm guilty of stealing Paul's formula and giving it to you seven years ago."

"I can see you're determined to change his mind."

"Yes."

"That may be more difficult than you realize. Mikki is stubborn. This whole thing is as crazy as that time he accused me of having something to do with Sasha's death. Hell, the guy was trying to force *me* over the cliff."

"Why?"

"I never knew. Sasha had always resented my closeness to Mikki. Mikki and I were once the best of friends.

Until we made the mistake of falling in love with the same girl. Rochelle. We both courted her, but when it came time for her to choose between us, neither of us could bear the thought of losing to the other. Egotistical fools. We dropped her, each of us loving her, neither of us thinking how she might react."

"What happened?"

"Rochelle was found dead one morning, having swallowed a handful of sleeping pills. The guilt was the first wedge in our relationship. Then there was Sasha. Now we've been enemies so long I can scarcely remember when we were not. But I didn't steal that formula from Dazzle. And I didn't know you were married to Mikki, or I never would have used your face or your name with our launch. Roger withdrew the product from the market immediately, and he refused to discuss his decision or to let me investigate the matter further."

They regarded each other in silence.

"You know, Liz, you never ask about your father or Mimi when I come. Do you resent Mimi so much that you have decided to have nothing to do with your own father?"

Liz trembled. "I don't resent Mimi. In my short acquaintance with my 'real' father, I realized he is the kind of man who will always have a beautiful, smiling face before him. My mother once fulfilled that role—until she became pregnant with me. Now he has Mimi."

Jock shrugged. There seemed nothing more he could say. The affection she'd felt for her real father after he'd found her and made her his heir seemed to be gone.

"So there's no chance for us?" Jock asked at last, changing the subject.

She moved into the circle of his arms.

"If only it were you, and not Alexander." She kissed him gently then on the lips in parting.

A WEEK had passed since the night of terror, a week in which Juan had been arrested, a week of constant togetherness between husband and wife that had deepened the bond of love Liz felt toward Alexander.

Alex had come home from the hospital the day before, and though the child was pale and listless, he was improving.

Liz enjoyed tending to Alexander. She hoped that by showing him kindness, he would feel her love.

That particular evening Liz stepped into Alexander's bedroom to collect his supper tray and saw that he was sitting bare-chested at the writing table.

He looked up, and she saw a flicker of his old warmth and regard.

"Liz, I've got to go back to London, but I want you and the twins to come with me even though I can't—" He hesitated. He didn't want to hurt her.

She looked into his eyes and saw his doubt and desire and compassion. "Make promises that you can't keep," she finished.

"God help me, Liz, I can't go back without you," he muttered raggedly.

"It won't be easy for you, Alexander. Your family, everyone at Dazzle believes I betrayed you."

"No," he agreed, "it won't be easy—for either of us."

She thought of the long, empty years that had separated them, of the gulf of misunderstanding that still separated them. Quiet tears filled her eyes. She would do anything, promise anything

in order to stay near him. "Alexander, I'll come back with you."

HIS OLDER half brother, Paul, called the next day from Paris. Paul skipped the amenities.

"A most unpleasant rumor has come to my attention, Mikki."

"What, precisely?" Alexander drawled.

"That the reason you have been gone so long is that you have found Liz and have reconciled with her."

"What if I have?"

"It's the end of your career at Dazzle. The board cannot forget she almost ruined the company."

"That was never proven in a court of law," Alexander stated coldly.

"Liz is Roger Chartres's daughter and his chosen heir to Radiance. She sees Jock on a regular basis. But, of course, you cannot be ignorant of that fact. Jock was in Mexico visiting her not six days ago. Don't tell me he managed that without your knowledge. There was a time when you would not have stood by—"

"Shut up, Paul, damn you."

Alexander swallowed the bitter bile clogging his throat. Jock here? Was his wife such a skilled liar that she could go from one man to another?

"If you bring Liz home with you, no one here will trust you."

"Not even you?"

There was a silence before the line went dead.

*

LIZ AND Alexander ate dinner in the dining room that night. When she entered the room, he glanced at her warily. Liz's smile was soft and warm and beautiful, and Alexander was caught for a moment in the spell of it

before he reminded himself she probably smiled just as warmly for Jock.

Liz's joy at seeing him was instantly dashed when his dark, brooding face hardened with contempt.

They ate in awkward silence.

"What time should I have the children ready tomorrow?" she ventured.

"As early as possible," came his terse reply.

"I'm looking forward to going home," she said shyly, trying to make light conversation.

He shot her an odd look. "Really? Why?" He wondered if she was thinking of Jock, who would be more accessible to her when she was in London.

"Because of you—to try again."

"To try what, my love?" He flashed her a look of deep bitterness.

"Alexander, I don't understand why you're so angry," she began uncertainly. "What have I done?"

"I will tell you nothing," he growled. "And I will take you with me only on one condition."

"What condition?"

"You are not to see or even to speak to Jock again. Nor do I want you to communicate with your father."

A GRAY slanting rain was falling when the Vorzenski jet touched down in London's Gatwick Airport. Liz felt weary and wrinkled from the flight.

Alexander helped Liz and the children disembark. They were instantly surrounded; microphones were thrust in front of their mouths. Flashbulbs popped in their faces as rapidly as the reporters' questions.

The boldest journalist, an aging, obese man, jumped in front of Liz. He leered into her face. "Princess, why did you run away seven years ago? Is it

true that you married the prince to steal Dazzle's formula? Isn't it a fact that you're still determined to ruin him?"

Alexander stepped between Liz and the man, grabbing the burly fellow by the lapels. A hundred flashbulbs burst at once.

The door of the silver Rolls swung open and Liz stepped thankfully inside, the wide-eyed twins and Alexander right behind her.

"It seems that I make things worse for you without even trying," she said in a small voice.

"That scene was nothing compared to what will take place when I face the board tonight."

"Tonight?"

He nodded grimly. "My enemies are going to demand my head on a silver platter."

"Because of me?"

"You're one of the reasons." Glinting gold eyes swept her solemn face in cold amusement. "It's a pity you won't be there to witness my execution, love."

She gasped. Her face turned ashen.

His thoughts plunged him into an utterly black mood, and he forced his gaze away. Never had London seemed more dismal to him. Rain slashed against the hood as the Rolls sped toward the town house that Alexander leased on a quiet back street a short distance from Hyde Park.

Liz was a part of him, albeit an unwanted part, and when he hurt her, he hurt himself. Damn it to hell! He loved her.

*

THE SHADES were drawn and the elegant silver room was dark and silent except for the blare of the newscast. Liz Vorzenski's ravished white face filled the screen before the camera was jostled. Another camera caught the scenario of the prince dramatically protecting his wife from an overly zealous newsman.

The person on the brocade sofa in the dim room leaned forward tensely, hands clasped on knees, brows furrowed when the newscast ended. The set was switched off by fingers that shook.

Liz had come back. She didn't look as radiant as she had as a bride seven years ago.

The person in the room felt like God. Hadn't the Vorzenskis suffered enough? Should they now be allowed a normal life?

The mere thought bit like the pain of a dagger in an unhealed wound and brought the stifling feelings of the old madness and hatred. The possibility of any happiness between Mikki Vorzenski and Liz was as unendurable as it had always been.

"Never! Never will I allow it."

Gloved fingers reached for the telephone and dialed.

THE BUZZING phone seemed as agitated as Liz's thoughts, but she did not answer it because in Alexander's house the phone calls were always screened by the staff.

Alexander's lavish suite included two bedrooms, two baths, two dressing rooms and a sitting room between the bedrooms. If Liz had not been so upset she would have thought the rooms beautiful.

She paced restlessly. She didn't know what to do with herself in this grand, orderly house. Ana Lou had taken over the children, and for the present Liz was relieved about that.

Liz's thoughts turned to Alexander. An hour ago she had stood forlornly at the windows and watched the rain spatter his ebony hair and the expensive coat covering his broad shoulders as he leaned down and stepped once more into the Rolls. He'd never looked up or given a thought for an affectionate caress or goodbye kiss from his wife.

Alexander had said he would be crucified by his family and the Dazzle board tonight because of her. Was there nothing she could do to improve his situation? What if she went and pleaded with the board on his behalf? What could it hurt?

A knock sounded on the door and the housekeeper's muffled voice from the hall interrupted her thoughts.

"Mr. Jock Rocheaux is on the phone, madam."

Liz lifted the extension. Her hand was shaking. "Jock!"

"Hello, Liz. Your father wants to see you. He saw you on television, and he has asked me to bring you to Paris."

"Oh."

"Liz, the man's brokenhearted. He said you believe he is responsible for wrecking your marriage to Mikki. He wants to explain and to apologize."

"So he admits he's responsible?" Liz asked dully.

"Not in so many words. You know Roger is hardly the kind of man to lay his feelings out on the table for my perusal. But, yes, he feels responsible."

"Jock, I made up my mind a long time ago that I didn't want to have anything more to do with a man who

destroyed the one thing in my life that mattered to me. Even if he is—" Her voice broke. "I can't see either of you because I promised Alexander I wouldn't."

"Liz—"

"Goodbye, Jock."

Liz was in the foyer waiting for a cab when the stony Mrs. Benchley came to her and told her that Jock was on the phone again.

"Please tell him I'm not at home. I've got to make that board meeting on time."

The housekeeper opened her mouth to say something, but Liz had already run out the door.

ALEXANDER SAT at his desk, which was piled with mail, contracts and reports. Michelle, his secretary, was trying to explain the chaos.

Finally he stopped her in midsentence and snapped in his deep, thundering baritone, "Save your breath, Michelle. You may need to explain this to the new president if I'm sacked tonight."

"Surely they won't do that, Mr. Vorzenski."

"I'm not so sure." He managed a smile. "Run along now, and type that one report I asked for, if you don't mind. I need to organize my thoughts before the board meeting."

Alexander lifted his gaze thoughtfully to the portrait of his grandfather. The painted eyes of Philippe Rocheaux, who had founded Dazzle, Ltd., ninety years ago, met his. Alexander smiled craftily to himself.

The intercom sounded, and Michelle informed Alexander that everyone was in the boardroom.

LIZ'S TAXI slowly threaded its way between red double-decked buses and black taxis onto Piccadilly.

Once England had meant Cornwall and her beloved Killigen Hall to Liz, that superb feeling of being part of a family that had endured for generations. Those illusions had been stripped from her by Ashley's death. She could almost smell the tang of cooking over furze fires on summer evenings when she and Ashley had camped out and lain beneath the stars, and he'd told her stories of knackers and tin miners. She'd assumed he was her father. Funny, how she'd taken it for granted. She'd lost Ashley first. Then her mother had sold Killigen Hall and run off to France with her young man, in the futile search for her lost youth and beauty. The distance that had always existed between Liz and her mother became estrangement.

Liz swallowed the dry lump in her throat. She wanted to remember that time of love and security. She had the feeling that if she fought hard enough today, and if she could win Alexander's love, she might be able to give that kind of life to her own children and to Alexander.

The taxi driver braked sharply and came to a standstill. When Liz realized that the traffic ahead was impossibly jammed, she tapped on the glass behind the driver. "Let me off here," she said. "I've decided to walk the rest of the way."

In front of the Dazzle building a Volvo had crashed into a bus on Regent Street, and the bus had plowed into a building. The smashed car was abandoned.

A grandmotherly woman behind Liz said crisply, "I seen it happen, you know, the accident. Almost looked as

if the man in the car did it on purpose, the way he ran into that bus. He ran off the minute it happened, him that done it."

Bobbies ran about whistling and barking orders. When Liz walked into the Dazzle building, no one was at the desk to question her. She decided to take the stairs.

Inside the stairwell Liz heard the sound of high heels skittering on the concrete stairs high above her, sharp, panicked beats like the pounding of her own heart. A door opened and closed, and then there was silence.

When she reached the top floor, she marched purposefully to her husband's office. The outer office was empty.

Liz opened the door to Alexander's office and stepped inside. She heard a choked gasp from the darkened corner behind Alexander's desk.

"How did you get in here?" Michelle asked in a shaken voice. The secretary stepped into the light. She clutched a sheaf of papers beneath her breasts.

"I came to see my husband," Liz said, moving to the door of the boardroom and lifting the handle.

"You can't do that!" Michelle cried.

"I just did," Liz said with a bold smile as she swept into the room.

Princess Vorzenski, the family matriarch, halted her speech in midsentence.

Alexander stood up slowly, and said smoothly, "Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce you to the lady we've all been so avidly discussing. My wife, Liz."

She felt their eyes boring into her, assessing her, distrusting her.

Princess Vorzenski regained her tongue and attacked. "So this is your

impossible wife, Mikki? The wife you promised us you would hide in the country while you smooth everything over. I knew I was right. You should be removed from the presidency until you recover your sanity where this woman is concerned. Maybe now everyone will listen to me."

"Won't anybody here listen to me?"

Liz cried. "I know you're against me. I know you want Alexander to divorce me, but I love him. I never did anything to hurt him or you. I came here today to tell you that I am innocent. And so is he."

The princess spoke. "If you're innocent, Liz Chartres, why didn't you come to the board seven years ago? Why did you run away?"

"Alexander wanted me out of his life. I was pregnant, and I thought he did not want...children from me, that he could not really love them." Her last sentence was a dying whisper. "But I was so very wrong...about everything."

"Liz—" Alexander's voice betrayed more warmth than he would have liked. Doubtless she was wielding the deathblow to his career, but it didn't seem to matter.

"Don't try to stop me, Alexander," Liz said softly, speaking at last to him. "I'm going to find out for sure who stole Paul's formula and deliberately framed me, because I know you won't believe me unless I do."

Liz swallowed. No one believed her.

The princess said, "Give Mikhail up before you destroy him. Go back to Mexico and make your puppets again."

"You've made your decision then, I see," Liz said in a strained, low tone. "It's useless to talk further."

She could bear no more. She spun on her heel and dashed into the hall. A hammer pounded inside her brain. She'd been wrong to come. She pushed the button for the elevator.

Alexander came out of the board-room looking weary and drawn. "I'll take you home," he said grimly.

"So that I won't get into trouble? Alexander, I'm sorry I came. I shouldn't have provoked your mother. I'm worried that now she'll find it hard to forgive me."

He laughed shortly. "Maman does not have a forgiving nature. I had hoped to bring you two together under different circumstances. As it is, you collided. Now we must deal with the consequences."

"I thought only to—"

He was determined not to let her pretend she had had his interests at heart. "Liz. Don't. I'm taking you home."

She saw that he wouldn't believe in her. "Alexander, tonight I need to be alone, to try to think what to do. Please, let me leave by myself."

"If you won't come home with me, at least let me see you safely inside a cab," he said wearily.

The doors of the elevator opened. Alexander had every intention of following her, but when he glanced at the man who moved toward the doors, he recognized his cousin, Jock Rocheaux.

As Liz stumbled into Jock's waiting arms, the doors closed. Alexander rushed blindly toward the stairwell.

Inside the elevator, Liz pressed her shaking body against Jock.

"Oh, Jock, I've made such a terrible muddle of my life. I've hurt everyone—even you."

"You can't be in love without hurting people. I should know. I'm an old hand at hurting. Here..." He handed her his handkerchief. "Liz, I snuck inside Dazzle tonight to find you. We have to talk—now." His golden face was more urgent than she'd ever seen it. "You've got to come to Paris with me."

The doors of the elevator opened, and a powerful arm reached inside and wrenched Jock bodily from Liz.

"Paris! If you think for one minute I'm going to let you sail off into the sunset with my wife, Jock, you are deranged," Alexander snarled.

Four uniformed men surrounded Jock. "Mikki," Jock stalled. "I have to convince Liz to come to Paris. What I have to say can only be said privately—to her."

"I never doubted that for a minute."

The four guards hustled Jock down the hall to a small office. Liz wasn't up to any more quarrels tonight. She seized the opportunity to escape.

Jock was the first to notice that Liz had not followed them into the office.

"Where's Liz?" he demanded, his voice urgent. "Mikki, you've got to find her. It's a—"

Alexander had already run out of the office and down the hall into the rain. He didn't hear the end of his cousin's harshly expelled sentence.

"It's a matter of life and death."

LIZ WAS trembling with fatigue and nervous strain. She trudged up to her bedroom feeling a stifling sensation of aloneness.

As she went to bed, her mind was still a jumble of remorse over what

she'd done.

Later, in the darkness, Alexander's voice came to her. "Liz, are you awake?" His hand gently smoothed her hair from her forehead. "I don't blame you for not wanting to talk."

She began to cry. "Tonight, when I went to Dazzle, I wanted only to help you, Alexander, and I ended up hurting you." More tears fell.

"I've been hurt before. I'll survive." His voice was infinitely gentle.

"I guess now it will be difficult for you to convince the board you can manage me."

"Quite difficult."

"I'm sorry. Can you believe me when I say that I didn't mean to make things harder for you?"

"Honestly?" His hand in her hair was still.

"Honestly," she said.

"I don't know."

"Alexander, how can we go on like this, when you have all these doubts?"

"Because not going on would be so much worse. I learned that much tonight when you ran out into the rain." His warm fingers moved on her, this time in a caress upon her shoulders beneath the heaviness of her hair. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Even about Jock?" she asked.

"Even about Jock." He had tensed, but his voice remained easy. "I was... I am...jealous. Because I knew he was with you in Mexico, and you didn't tell me."

Liz's hand slid low over Alexander's flat belly, deliberately stirring him. "You have nothing to be jealous about."

He held her in silence for a long moment. Then the phone began to ring.

"Oh, dear," Liz cried, jumping from the bed. She had forgotten not to answer it.

"Hello," she whispered.

Princess Vorzenski's shrill voice exploded into the phone. "Let me speak to Mikhail."

Without a word, Liz handed Alexander the telephone.

As he listened to the princess, his expression darkened. When at last he hung up, he stared at his wife, and his eyes were as cold and hard as stones.

"Paul's formula was stolen tonight." In his voice there was a deadness that she had never heard before. "I have lost the presidency of Dazzle. Maman has filled the office herself."

"And you think I took the formula, don't you, Alexander?" He stared at her in silence. "Don't you?"

In his eyes she saw the unspoken accusation. She turned her face to the wall so that he could not read her face. If anyone knew what had happened to the formula, her father surely must.

"You realize," Alexander said grimly, "that if you run away this time, to Paris or anywhere else, everyone will be convinced you had some part in this."

"I—I—" She couldn't utter a sound. She would not let Roger get away with this a second time. Even if it cost her her marriage.

"Liz—"

His eyes captured hers in a hard and relentless gaze that stripped away her defenses, leaving her shatteringly vulnerable.

"I was a fool to make that promise to you," she admitted at last.

"I see," he said in a low, dead voice. "If you go to Paris, I hope you understand it will be the end of...us."

Oh, she understood. She met his deep, dark gaze. The vision of his too-dear features wavered. She knew Alexander was lost to her forever.

*

WHAT DID ONE say to a man as callous as Roger?

Once Liz had not thought her father callous. How different she had felt that last time when she'd secretly flown to Paris to tell Roger of her marriage.

Shocked at first, Roger had pretended to understand. He'd gathered Liz into his arms, kissed her, acting as if he shared her joy. He had even gone as far as to say he hoped that this marriage could bring a reconciliation between himself and Alexander's family.

A week later Paul's formula had been stolen and Radiance had launched the pirated perfume under the name Liz, using publicity pictures that had been originally intended for another Radiance fragrance, pictures Roger had promised to destroy when he'd learned of her secret marriage.

After what Jock had said yesterday, Liz was convinced that what she'd always suspected was true, that her father had been behind the theft and launch because he wanted to break up her marriage.

The car she'd rented thrust its way down the confusion of the Rue Royal and then onto the great expanse of the Concorde where the Crillon was veiled with leafed-out chestnut trees.

Soon after that, Liz reached her father's opulent Paris flat, and Armande let her inside and showed her to her father's study. Liz paced before the long windows overlooking the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré.

Armande returned. "*Madame*, I've reached your father's office. Monsieur Chartres is on the telephone."

Liz lifted the silver receiver. It was as cold as ice in her shaking fingers.

"Liz!" The deep, sensually accented baritone was warm with welcome. "Did Jock tell you I wanted to see you?"

"Yes."

"And is he with you now?"

"I'm alone."

"Odd." There was the faintest trace of alarm in his low voice.

"I did not come because of Jock or you. I came to stop you from hurting Alexander again."

After a long pause, he said, "I see."

"Jock said you admitted having stolen Paul's formula seven years ago."

"In a way I do feel I am responsible. I—"

"When Paul's formula was removed from Alexander's safe last night—"

"Paul's formula? Last night?"

The line went dead.

"Father?"

There was no dial tone. Liz called for Armande.

Upstairs a door opened. A velvet reply rippled down the stairs.

"Liz, I was asleep when you arrived." Mimi swept into the room.

"Mimi, I was talking to Roger. The phone went dead before we had finished speaking."

"It happens. There is some construction in the area. Let me check the other line for you and see if I can reach Roger."

Mimi left the room. She returned with an opened bottle of Burgundy in one hand.

Mimi smiled. "Roger wants to meet us at Charmont in an hour." Char-

mont was Roger's château not far from Paris. Mimi poured a glass of wine and handed it to Liz. "This will give us time to visit. You need to relax before you see Roger." She poured the wine.

So, Mimi did realize how she dreaded seeing Roger. The wine was her way of being thoughtful. Liz did not have the heart to refuse her.

Some time later a horn sounded outside. It was Armande with the car.

With Armande at the wheel of Roger's Lincoln, the suburbs of Paris swept past in a blur. Liz felt woozy. The road seemed to be a perpetual zig-zag, and Liz felt less and less well.

Then Charmont burst into view. The car shot through the tall, powerfully fortified gate. Armande parked the Lincoln in front of the enormous south door.

Liz felt so weak and shaky she almost fell when she tried to get out.

"Liz, you're as white as a sheet," Mimi said, taking her by the hand.

The house was still, so unlike the Charmont she remembered. The air was damp and musty, as if the house had been shut up for a long time. Something felt terribly wrong.

Vaguely Liz was aware of Mimi leading her up the stairs to the bedroom she had always used when she had come to Charmont with Roger. It seemed to her that the two of them floated weightlessly as they mounted an endless white staircase.

Once inside the bedroom, Liz sank down upon the elaborate bed. The room began to spin.

Mimi said, "I think I will call the village doctor. Just in case."

Liz heard the retreat of Mimi's footsteps on the carpet and then the rapid, gunfire taps on the marble stairs. The sound reminded her of something.

Liz focused upon the golden phone on the gilt table by the window.

There was a phone in the room!

Muddled as her mind was, somehow she knew something was wrong if Mimi had gone downstairs to use a phone when there was one right there.

Liz rose and stumbled across the thick flowered carpet to reach the phone. She pulled the cord and the telephone crashed onto the floor. She lifted the receiver and held it against her ear.

The phone was dead.

Liz heard the Lincoln's engine roar in the drive downstairs. Armande was leaving! Mimi had gone downstairs to send him away.

Liz collapsed onto the floor. She heard the staccato tapping of the heels downstairs, and she knew where she had heard it before. In the stairwell at Dazzle's office building. Mimi had been there that night, the night the formula had been stolen.

That car accident had not been an accident. Mimi had deliberately planned it as a distraction so that she could enter the Dazzle offices undetected.

It was Mimi. Not Roger. Mimi had wanted to destroy her marriage. Liz felt herself sinking.

Liz didn't know how much time had passed, but she managed to focus on Mimi when she returned. Her golden face was naked with hatred.

"Why, Mimi? What have I ever done to you?"

The purr of her voice was filled with bitter sadness. "My sister died of an overdose—"

"W-what do I have to do with your sister?"

"Rochelle was my little sister. For her I climbed from the gutter to stardom. Then Jock Rocheaux and Mikki Vorzenski amused themselves and

made a game of my sister's love, and she died. She was so idealistic. After my wedding, she took pills because she was too excited to sleep. Or so the authorities said. My last words to her were said in anger. You see, she did not approve of my marrying a count, simply because he was a count."

"Rochelle's death must have been no more than an unfortunate accident," Liz murmured.

"I slept with Sasha Vorzenski, and I told him that I was sleeping with his cousin Jock as well. Sasha was so jealous that he tried to kill Jock on the racetrack the next day, but he died himself."

"Mimi, how could you...so coldly..."

"Mikki Vorzenski then suffered as I suffered." Mimi's eyes were glazed. "I became Roger's mistress to get close to Jock. Then you came to Paris. When Jock fell in love with you, I took you down to Deauville so you could meet Mikki Vorzenski.

"Then when there was to be a Dazzle launch, I had my cousin, Michelle, steal the formula, and I substituted it at the last minute. Jock was nearly ruined because he used your publicity pictures. I had torn up Roger's orders not to use them. Mikki Vorzenski nearly lost his presidency. The only problem was that Roger found out what I had done. He took the perfume off the market. But he still wanted me enough to forgive me.

"Michelle and I took the formula last night, and then I helped her run away. Soon it will be discovered that Mikki Vorzenski's car ran Jock down. Mikki will lose you. He will be accused of murder. His career will be ruined."

The words were a jumble in Liz's weary brain. She had to stay awake.

Sleep was death. She knew she'd been drugged.

Mimi fled the room, turning a key in the lock, imprisoning Liz. High heels clattered on the stairs.

Groggily Liz dragged herself to the window. The cool air revived her as she leaned out. In the distance she saw white, darting lights on the Charmont road.

Beneath the window was a ledge. The windows of the bedroom next to her had been thrown open. If Liz could walk along that ledge the ten feet to the next window and crawl inside, perhaps she could get downstairs.

The car lights twinkled on the road. The car was coming to the château. Liz pulled herself up onto the windowsill and swung her feet outside, sliding her body out the window until her toes touched the ledge.

She could scarcely stand, but somehow she managed to inch her way to the other window.

The car was in the drive. A terrible blackness swamped Liz, but she forced herself to keep moving. At last her hand curled over the windowsill. It took all her strength to pull herself inside. She collapsed headlong onto the floor.

The room was a blur. The blood in her head seemed to be a pounding force. Gathering her remaining strength, she staggered to the door. When she twisted the doorknob, it opened.

Deep baritone voices thundered from below. Liz crawled to the landing and pulled herself up.

Liz lurched toward that welcome sound of voices. When she reached the top of the stairs, she clutched the newel post. "Alexan—" Again no sound came.

In her panic, Liz let go of the newel post and lost her balance. She

screamed. The frail sound cut the air like the thinnest blade.

Alexander glanced up, his eyes filling with terror. He raced swiftly up the stairs, taking them two at a time, as Liz fell.

A violent stab of pain jolted. She rolled over and over until her soft body reached Alexander, who had climbed halfway up the stairs.

He wrapped her unconscious body in his arms and bent his black head very close to her face. He searched for her pulse, and when at last he felt the weak throb, he began to weep, his tears falling upon her face, which was as cold and still as death.

*

THE SOUND of music filled the sun-splashed villa that perched on the sculptured edge of a cliff high above Sardinia's Porto Rotondo.

A thousand bejeweled guests were crammed inside the villa or clustered upon the wide decks around the aqua expanse of the glistening pool. Samantha and Alex were splashing in the pool. From her balcony, Liz watched the milling crowd—executives from the highest echelons of both Dazzle and Radiance.

Liz smiled as she watched Jock limp across the deck and join her father. Somewhere in the press of people was Jock's new wife, Sarah, the lovely English nurse he'd fallen in love with when he was recuperating.

So much had happened in the month since Alexander had driven to Charmont with Roger and saved Liz from certain death. Mimi had been institutionalized in Switzerland. Michelle was behind bars. Roger had confided that Mimi had been repeatedly hospitalized for psychiatric reasons over the past few years, but that he had not re-

alized how dangerous she was. He said that in reality Mimi had blamed herself for Rochelle's death, but she'd tried to convince herself Jock and Alexander were to blame.

The night Mimi drugged Liz, Roger and Alexander had forced Armande to tell them that Mimi had taken Liz to Charmont, which had been closed for over a year because Roger was planning to renovate it. The formula that had been stolen the night before Mimi tried to kill Liz had been a fake substituted by Alexander as a precautionary measure.

Liz had recovered after two nights in a Paris hospital. Roger told her that Alexander had hovered at her bedside until she was out of danger, but that when she had regained consciousness, he'd left Paris and returned to London. His leaving her had ripped her heart to pieces.

A letter from Alexander came to her in Paris. He offered her his villa in Sardinia to recover. When she accepted, in the hope of seeing him, he sent Ana Lou and the children to join her. But he had not come himself.

The only letter that came from him was one he forwarded from Manuel, who wanted to buy the doll factory.

Within a week, Liz had decided what she would do. She called Roger in Paris and invited him to Sardinia.

The night Roger arrived, Liz asked for his help. "Because of me, Alexander has lost the presidency of Dazzle. I know that everything regarding the explosion has been resolved, that all charges against him have been dropped. But the news stories in the papers were so lurid, his career may never recover."

"Men like Mikki Vorzenski have a way of landing on their feet. Give him time, my child."

"But, don't you see, he's not fighting, and his mother will never give him a chance."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Could you . . . Could we buy Dazzle?"

"And they call Mikki Vorzenski a pirate." Roger began to laugh, but his eyes were filled with love.

"Alexander owns a great deal of stock in Dazzle, Father. So does Paul. Perhaps you could approach them?"

"Perhaps. . . ." Roger folded her hand in his. "You do realize you might be making a very grave mistake. Some men do not like to be bought by a woman."

The memory faded and the present came back with violent force, but Roger's words lingered.

Some men do not like to be bought by a woman.

This party was in celebration of the upcoming merger of two of the greatest names in the perfume world—Dazzle and Radiance. The financial papers had made much of it.

Suddenly a hush swept the party, and Liz saw a very tall black-headed man leading a silver-haired woman on his arm. Alexander and the princess. Roger extended his hand and Paulette took it. After a long while she knelt and leaned over the pool. She didn't seem to mind that the children splashed her when they swam near. The princess's smile was radiant.

Liz remembered something Alexander had told her once about his mother, that she was always on the side of the winner.

Liz was the winner.

As if drawn to a magnet, Liz's gaze melded with Alexander's. For a long moment he stared up at her. He was as

still as a statue, and then he was running.

And so was she.

High-heeled sandals scampered down red tile stairs. Liz flew into his arms. He was kissing her, whirling her in his arms.

"I love you," he said. "I don't know if you can ever forgive me for being so stupidly blind to the truth."

"I thought you were mad because I bought Dazzle."

"Mad?" He threw back his black head and laughed. "Mad? I thought it was one hell of a way to tell a guy you love him. It was insanely reckless, of course. I don't deserve you," he said, "but, Liz, I can't live without you."

"Nor can I."

"So I'm to be president of your company?" he murmured.

"Our company."

"I bought you a gift, too," he said.

Her eyes flashed with excitement. "What?"

"I went down to Cornwall and bought that crumbling antiquity you're so insane about."

"Killigen Hall?" She shrieked with joy.

"Ghosts and all."

"How did you manage it?"

"By paying three times what it was worth."

"Whatever you paid, I'll make it worth it." She began to laugh as he lifted her into his arms again. "Where are you taking me?"

"Somewhere private where you can start earning your keep."

He began to walk up the stairs to the sun-drenched terrace outside the master bedroom.

They kissed, surrendering at last to the brilliant and fulfilling dazzle of their everlasting love.

STAR SIGNS—MAY & JUNE



LIBRA September 23–October 22

Don't complicate matters this month by trying to accomplish things too quickly. Take your time, and things will progress at their own steady rate. You'll be surprised by someone's fierce temper midmonth; they aren't as easygoing as you first thought, and this comes as a big shock to you.



SCORPIO October 23–November 22

Opportunity, motivation and luck are all on your side this month, and things couldn't be better. An obstacle does occur midmonth, but it's nothing you can't handle if you put your mind to it. Just take time for a proper explanation, be honest and be prepared to listen, too.



SAGITTARIUS November 23–December 22

The start of the month sees you constantly running around, so it's lucky that this month you have energy to spare. A surprise phone call mid-month catches you on the go, but take time to ponder and wonderful things could follow from this. A loved one finds it difficult to keep up with you, so take time to be with them.



CAPRICORN December 23–January 22

You'll find yourself struggling with a complicated situation midmonth, but be patient and things will work out for the best in the end. Just remember that you're not infallible and people will understand that you occasionally make mistakes, as well. The month will end on a high!



AQUARIUS January 23–February 22

This month you are on the verge of a long-awaited change. Don't for one minute think you're going to be even slightly disappointed, because you aren't! Make the most of this happy month and trust your own instincts. You won't look back!



PISCES February 23–March 22

Give yourself time on your own this month if you need it, and don't feel guilty. Shut yourself away and do all those things you've been wanting to do for a long time. Get them out of your system, because toward the end of the month, you'll find you have less and less time.

STAR SIGNS (continued)



ARIES March 23–April 22

You'll have a few worries at the start of this month, but most of them will turn out to be needless. Midmonth your spirits will lift and the shaky start will soon be forgotten. Energy and enthusiasm take over, and you'll find yourself involved in an exciting social whirl. Make the most of this exhilarating time!



TAURUS April 23–May 22

Something that once seemed unattainable is now a viable proposition, but you are still apprehensive about taking up an advantageous offer. Make the most of any changes that are taking place, and you won't look back. All in all, a good month!



GEMINI May 23–June 21

A matter that deserves some action is not getting your full attention. Summon all your strength, be bold and just act on how you feel. You won't regret it! Also, make sure that your personal priorities don't get pushed to the back of your mind and forgotten in this hectic month.



CANCER June 22–July 22

This month seems to be based on your own achievements. So be proud of them and forgive yourself any errors you've made along the way. A close friend will be wanting more attention than you have time for this month, but try to make the time and you will be much appreciated!



LEO July 23–August 22

This is a good month to put any spare time toward hobbies or ambitions that you've been waiting to give your attention to for a long time. You may also feel the need to stand up for yourself when someone disagrees with you about something you feel you know more about. Don't give in!



VIRGO August 23–September 22

A great temptation this month is to put off important jobs that should really be done now. Why not sort them out so you'll be able to leave your mind free for other more enjoyable things? Your social life looks set to take off now. It couldn't come at a better time—make the most of it!

COMING IN FUTURE ISSUES OF

HARLEQUIN®
WORLD'S BEST

Romances

RAWHIDE AND LACE • Diana Palmer

Because of Ty Wade, Erin had been crippled in a car crash. She'd lost the baby he'd given her, and her modeling career in the process. He knew she could never forgive him. So when she agreed to return to Texas to help save Staghorn Ranch, he vowed to make her well again... Well enough to walk away from him?

THERE MUST BE LOVE • Samantha Day

To Shane Wilder, marriage was a mistake far too many people made in life. He'd stick to writing detective novels and indulging in an occasional short-term affair. Vanessa, on the other hand, had already made one massive mistake in marriage and now would settle for nothing less than love, commitment...all the things Shane distrusted.

**Look for these stories
and many more in
future issues!**



Join the festivities as Harlequin celebrates
Temptation's tenth anniversary in 1994!

Look for tempting treats from your favorite
Temptation authors all year long. The celebration
begins with *Passion's Quest*—four exciting sensual
stories featuring the most elemental passions....

The temptation continues with *Lost Loves*, a sizzling
miniseries about love lost...love found. And watch for
the 500th Temptation in July by bestselling author
Rita Clay Estrada, a seductive story in the vein
of the much-loved tale, *THE IVORY KEY*.

In May, look for details of an irresistible offer:
three classic Temptation novels by Rita Clay Estrada,
Glenda Sanders and Gina Wilkins in a collector's
hardcover edition—free with proof of purchase!

After ten tempting years, *nobody* can resist

Temptation®

HTIOAN

Coming Next Month from



The next in the delightful

**HAZARDS,
INC.**
series

**THE PIRATE PRINCESS
BY
SUZANNE SIMMS**

When Nick decides to take some vacation time on Key West, he never expects to get mixed up in Melina Morgan's zany plans to find her ancestor's long-lost buried treasure!

HAZARDS, INC.: Danger is their business; love is their reward!

If you missed the first book in the HAZARDS, INC. series, *The Brainy Beauty* (D #850), order your copy now by sending your name, address, zip or postal code, along with a check or money order (please do not send cash) for \$2.99 plus 75¢ postage and handling (\$1.00 in Canada), payable to Silhouette Books, to:

In the U.S.

Silhouette Books
3010 Walden Ave.
P. O. Box 9077
Buffalo, NY 14269-9077

In Canada

Silhouette Books
P. O. Box 636
Fort Erie, Ontario
L2A 5X3

Please specify book title(s) with your order.
Canadian residents add applicable federal and provincial taxes.

SDHAZ2

HE'S AN

AMERICAN HERO

He's a man's man, and every woman's dream. Strong, sensitive and so irresistible—he's an American Hero.

For April: **KEEPER**, by Patricia Gardner Evans: From the moment Cleese Starrett encountered Laurel Drew fishing in his river, he was hooked. But reeling in this lovely lady might prove harder than he thought.

For May: **MICHAEL'S FATHER**, by Dallas Schulze: Kel Bryan needed a housekeeper—fast. And Megan Roarke did more than fit the bill; she fit snugly into his open arms. Then she told him her news....

For June: **SIMPLE GIFTS**, by Kathleen Korbel: For too long Rock O'Connor had fought the good fight to no avail. Then Lee Kendall entered his jaded world, her zest for life rekindling his former passion—as well as a new one.

AMERICAN HEROES: Men who give all they've got for their country, their work—the women they love.

Only from



IMHER08

HARLEQUIN® WORLD'S BEST *Romances*

RITA CLAY—Summer Song

She wanted a baby but she didn't want a husband, and Caro thought she had the ideal solution. With the help of her doctor and her lawyer, she would get the family she had always wanted. J. T. Cole had different ideas, however. He was perfectly willing to give Caro a child, but only the time-honored method would do for him. The hardest thing for Caro to accept was that once she had met J. T., nothing but love would do for her, either.

BARBARA FAITH—Bedouin Bride

Katherine Bishop felt as if she were living a novel when she was kidnapped and carried into the Moroccan desert. Rashid Ben Hasir had connections to two worlds: the civilized West, and the fierce East that was his heritage. He and Katherine clashed beneath the blazing sun, and again on the shifting sands below the star-filled sky. They were two worlds on a collision course, two hearts that could only beat as one.

STEPHANIE JAMES—Corporate Affair

Beautiful tycoon Kalinda Brady hadn't expected the sparks to fly with Rand Alastair, artist and fisherman, the stranger whose caresses left her yearning for more. Kalinda had come to Colorado determined to avenge a lost love. But Rand's powerful embrace left her torn between her passion for revenge and hunger for this lover who conquered her heart, stole into her world and proceeded to make it his own.

ANN MAJOR—Dazzle

Prince Alexander Vorzenski lived more like a pirate than the title he was born to. For without Liz Chartres, he was nothing. Liz had taken their children and fled into hiding. After seven years, he had finally tracked her down. Yet Liz vowed to forget the man who had aroused her to the greatest heights of passion—and then accused her of betraying his secrets. But how can a woman command a heart that will not obey?

ACROSS

1. Unit of heat: abbr.
4. Slippery ones
8. Tennis great
12. Endure
15. Let fall
16. Pare
17. Chin whiskers
18. Kind of dancer: hyph.
19. Baltic and Red
20. Tensed
22. Tailor's need
24. Frozen water
25. Breakfast dish
27. Sower
31. Postman's load
36. Above, poetically
37. Actress Moore
39. Lendl of tennis
40. Misplace
42. Shovel
44. Baseball-team count
45. Soon
46. Unique person
47. Alphabet member
48. Portrays
51. Brighter
54. Unwanted plant
56. ____ mode: 2 wds.
57. Scheduled
61. Dweller
66. Domesticate
67. Soviet mountain range
69. Concerned one
70. Sign
71. Dairy-farm sight
72. Expunge
73. Confined

74. Ferber

75. French holy woman: abbr.

DOWN

1. Taxis
2. Help
3. Falsifier
4. Rim
5. Wear away
6. Captain's record
7. Soaker-upper
8. Church feature
9. Future plant
10. Cure
11. Otherwise
13. Empty of liquid
14. Decree
21. Requirements
23. New York summer hours: abbr.
26. Coasts
27. Conflicting
28. Sierra ____
29. Fire crime
30. Rest
32. Soft metal
33. Oust
34. Indian princess
35. Disdainful look
38. Chess piece
41. Conclusion
43. Namesakes of Bombeck
49. Female sheep
50. Lose, as weight
52. Wonderland's girl
53. Detection device
55. Sketched
57. Cease
58. Hobbled

59. So be it!

60. Camper's domicile

62. "Born Free" heroine

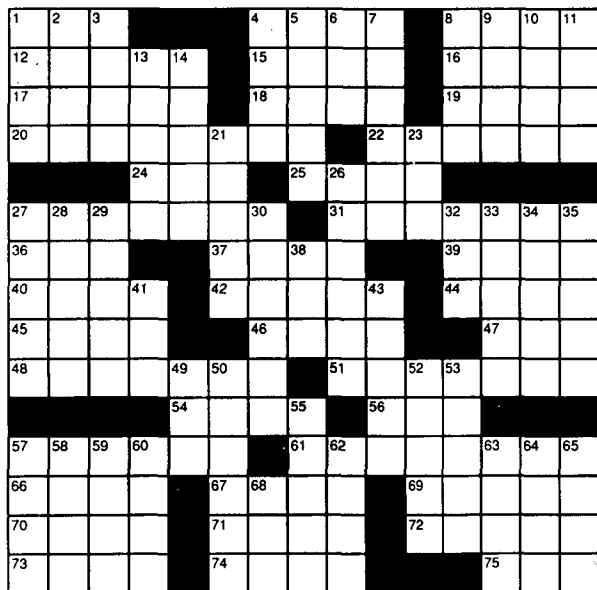
63. Ages

64. Bird's home

65. Elm

68. Staff

Solution on page 89 of this issue.



All New Stories!

STOLENTM *moments*

Here's a brand-new collection of six short romances guaranteed to fill *your* stolen moments with excitement and intrigue! Each is a complete contemporary love story—a blend of adventure, sensuality and romance—in just 96 exciting pages. Perfect for the busy woman of the nineties!

And to start you off, we'll send you the first book
ABSOLUTELY FREE!

MAGGIE AND HER COLONEL by MERLINE LOVELACE

There's something about a man in uniform that's awfully hard to resist! Or so it seems to Maggie Wescott, an environmental engineer who's just taken a job at an air force base in Florida. Maggie is immediately at odds with Colonel "Mac" MacRae, nicknamed "the Mountain."

In the past, Maggie always tried to avoid emotional attachments on the job—but this is different. Strong, stubborn and maddeningly sexy, Colonel Mac, his adorable twin sons and his big shaggy dog are more than Maggie can resist!

You'll find *Maggie and Her Colonel* hard to resist also! And best of all, the book is yours free when you take these 5 other exciting STOLEN MOMENTS romances...

- * SIZZLE by Jennifer Crusie
- * PRAIRIE SUMMER by Alina Roberts
- * THE SUGAR CUP by Annie Sims
- * LOVE ME NOT by Barbara Stewart
- * ANNIVERSARY WALTZ by Anne Marie Duquette



Send no money!
Use the postpaid
reply card inside!

ALL BRAND-NEW STORIES—NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED!

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED